

George Manville Fenn

"Nic Revel"

Chapter One.

Captain Revel is Cross.

"Late again, Nic," said Captain Revel.

"Very sorry, father."

"Yes, you always are 'very sorry,' sir. I never saw such a fellow to sleep. Why, when I was a lad of your age—let's see, you're just eighteen."

"Yes, father, and very hungry," said the young man, with a laugh and a glance at the breakfast-table.

"Always are very hungry. Why, when I was a lad of your age I didn't lead such an easy-going life as you do. You're spoiled, Nic, by an indulgent father.—Here, help me to some of that ham.—Had to keep my watch and turn up on deck at all hours; glad to eat weavilly biscuit.—Give me that brown bit.—Ah, I ought to have sent you to sea. Made a man of you. Heard the thunder, of course?"

"No, father. Was there a storm?"

"Storm—yes. Lightning as we used to have it in the East Indies, and the rain came down like a waterspout."

"I didn't hear anything of it, father."

"No; you'd sleep through an earthquake, or a shipwreck, or—Why, I say, Nic, you'll soon have a beard."

"Oh, nonsense, father! Shall I cut you some bread?"

"But you will," said the Captain, chuckling. "My word, how time goes! Only the other day you were an ugly little pup of a fellow, and I used to wipe your nose; and now you're as big as I am—I mean as tall."

"Yes; I'm not so stout, father," said Nic, laughing.

"None of your impudence, sir," said the heavy old sea-captain, frowning. "If you had been as much knocked about as I have, you might have been as stout."

Nic Revel could not see the common-sense of the remark, but he said nothing, and went on with his breakfast, glancing from time to time through the window at the glittering sea beyond the flagstaff, planted on the cliff which ran down perpendicularly to the little river that washed its base while flowing on towards the sea a mile lower down.

"Couldn't sleep a bit," said Captain Revel. "But I felt it coming all yesterday afternoon. Was I—er—a bit irritable?"

"Um—er—well, just a little, father," said Nic dryly.

"Humph! and that means I was like a bear—eh, sir?"

"I did not say so, father."

"No, sir; but you meant it. Well, enough to make me," cried the Captain, flushing. "I will not have it. I'll have half-a-dozen more watchers, and put a stop to their tricks. The land's mine, and the river's mine, and the salmon are mine; and if any more of those idle rascals come over from the town on to my grounds, after my fish, I'll shoot 'em, or run 'em through, or catch 'em and have 'em tied up and flogged."

"It is hard, father."

"*'Hard'* isn't hard enough, Nic, my boy," cried the Captain angrily. "The river's open to them below, and it's free to them up on the moors, and they may go and catch them in the sea if they want more room."

"If they can, father," said Nic, laughing.

"Well, yes—if they can, boy. Of course it's if they can with any one who goes fishing. But I will not have them come disturbing me. The impudent scoundrels!"

"Did you see somebody yesterday, then, father?"

"Didn't you hear me telling you, sir? Pay attention, and give me some more ham. Yes; I'd been up to the flagstaff and was walking along by the side of the combe, so as to come back

home through the wood path, when there was that great lazy scoundrel, Burge, over from the town with a long staff and a hook, and I was just in time to see him land a good twelve-pound salmon out of the pool—one of that half-dozen that have been lying there this fortnight past waiting for enough water to run up higher.”

“Did you speak to him, father?”

“Speak to him, sir!” cried the Captain. “I let him have a broadside.”

“What did he say, father?”

“Laughed at me—the scoundrel! Safe on the other side; and I had to stand still and see him carry off the beautiful fish.”

“The insolent dog!” cried Nic.

“Yes; I wish I was as young and strong and active as you, boy. I’d have gone down somehow, waded the river, and pushed the scoundrel in.”

He looked at his father and smiled.

“But I would, my boy: I was in such a fit of temper. Why can’t the rascals leave me and mine alone?”

“Like salmon, I suppose, father,” said the young man.

“So do we—but they might go up the river and catch them.”

“We get so many in the pool, and they tempt the idle people.”

“Then they have no business to fall into temptation. I’ll do something to stop them.”

“Better not, father,” said Nic quietly. “It would only mean fighting and trouble.”

“Bah!” cried Captain Revel, with his face growing redder than usual. “What a fellow to be my son! Why, sir, when I was your age I gloried in a fight.”

“Did you, father?”

“Yes, sir, I did.”

"Ah! but you were in training for a fighting-man."

"And I was weak enough, to please your poor mother, to let you be schooled for a bookworm, and a man of law and quips and quiddities, always ready to enter into an argument with me, and prove that black's white and white's no colour, as they say. Hark ye, sir, if it was not too late I'd get Jack Lawrence to take you to sea with him now. He'll be looking us up one of these days soon. It's nearly time he put in at Plymouth again."

"No, you would not, father," said the young man quietly.

"Ah! arguing again? Why not, pray?"

"Because you told me you were quite satisfied with what you had done."

"Humph! Hah! Yes! so I did. What are you going to do this morning—read?"

"Yes, father; read hard."

"Well, don't read too hard, my lad. Get out in the fresh air a bit. Why not try for a salmon? They'll be running up after this rain, and you may get one if there is not too much water."

"Yes, I might try," said the young man quietly; and soon after he strolled into the quaint old library, to begin poring over a heavy law-book full of wise statutes, forgetting everything but the task he had in hand; while Captain Revel went out to walk to the edge of the high cliff and sat down on the stone seat at the foot of the properly-rigged flagstaff. Here he scanned the glittering waters, criticising the manoeuvres of the craft passing up and down the Channel on their way to Portsmouth or the port of London, or westward for Plymouth, dreaming the while of his old ship and the adventures he had had till his wounds, received in a desperate engagement with a couple of piratical vessels in the American waters, incapacitated him for active service, and forced him to lead the life of an old-fashioned country gentleman at his home near the sea.

Chapter Two.

A Wet Fight.

The Captain was having his after-dinner nap when Nic took down one of the rods which always hung ready in the hall, glanced at the fly to see if it was all right, and then crossed the garden to the fields. He turned off towards the river, from which, deep down in the lovely combe, came a low, murmurous, rushing sound, quite distinct from a deep, sullen roar from the thick woodland a few hundred yards to his right.

"No fishing to-day," he said, and he rested his rod against one of the sturdy dwarf oaks which sheltered the house from the western gales, and then walked on, drawing in deep draughts of the soft salt air and enjoying the beauty of the scene around.

For the old estate had been well chosen by the Revels of two hundred years earlier; and, look which way he might, up or down the miniature valley, there were the never-tiring beauties of one of the most delightful English districts.

The murmur increased as the young man strode on down the rugged slope, or leaped from mossy stone to stone, amongst heather, furze, and fern, to where the steep sides of the combe grew more thickly clothed with trees, in and amongst which the sheep had made tracks like a map of the little valley, till all at once he stood at the edge of a huge mass of rock, gazing through the leaves at the foaming brown water which washed the base of the natural wall, and eddied and leaped and tore on along its zigzag bed, onward towards the sea.

From where he stood he gazed straight across at the other side of the combe, one mass of greens of every tint, here lit up by the sun, there deep in shadow; while, watered by the soft moist air and mists which rose from below, everything he gazed upon was rich and luxuriant in the extreme.

"The rain must have been tremendous up in the moor," thought the young man, as he gazed down into the lovely gully at the rushing water, which on the previous day had been a mere string of stony pools connected by a trickling stream, some of them deep and dark, the haunts of the salmon which came up in their season from the sea. "What a change! Yesterday, all as clear as crystal; now, quite a golden brown."

Then, thinking of how the salmon must be taking advantage of the little flood to run up higher to their spawning-grounds among the hills, Nic turned off to his right to follow a rugged track along the cliff-like side, sometimes low down, sometimes high up; now in deep shadow, now in openings where the sun shot through to make the hurrying waters sparkle and flash.

The young man went on and on for quite a quarter of a mile, with the sullen roar increasing till it became one deep musical boom; and, turning a corner where a portion of the cliff overhung the narrow path, and long strands of ivy hung down away from the stones, he stepped out of a green twilight into broad sunshine, to stand upon a shelf of rock, gazing into a circular pool some hundred feet across.

Here was the explanation of the deep, melodious roar. For, to his right, over what resembled a great eight-foot-high step in the valley, the whole of the little river plunged down from the continuation of the gorge, falling in one broad cascade in a glorious curve right into the pool, sending up a fine spray which formed a cloud, across which, like a bridge over the fall, the lovely tints of a rainbow played from time to time.

It was nothing new to Nic, that amphitheatre, into which he had gazed times enough ever since he was a child; but it had never seemed more lovely, nor the growth which fringed it from the edge of the water to fifty or sixty feet above his head more beautiful and green.

But he had an object in coming, and, following the shelf onward, he was soon standing level with the side of the fall, gazing intently at the watery curve and right into the pool where the water foamed and plunged down, rose a few yards away, and then set in a regular stream round and round the amphitheatre, a portion flowing out between two huge buttresses of granite, and then hurrying downstream.

Nic was about fifteen feet above the surface of the chaos of water, and a little above the head of the pool; while below him were blocks of stone, dripping bushes, and grasses, and then an easy descent to where he might have stood dry-shod and gazed beneath the curve of the falling water, as he had stood scores of times before.

But his attention was fixed upon the curve, and as he watched he saw something silvery flash out of the brown water and fall back into the pool where the foam was thickest.

Again he saw it, and this time it disappeared without falling back. For the salmon, fresh from the sea, were leaping at the fall to gain the upper waters of the river.

It was a romantic scene, and Nic stood watching for some minutes, breathing the moist air, while the spray began to

gather upon his garments, and the deep musical boom reverberated from the rocky sides of the chasm.

It was a grand day for the fish, and he was thinking that there would be plenty of them right up the river for miles, for again and again he saw salmon flash into sight as, by one tremendous spring and beat of their tails, they made their great effort to pass the obstacle in their way.

"Plenty for every one," he said to himself; "and plenty left for us," he added, as he saw other fish fail and drop back into the foam-covered amber and black water, to sail round with the stream, and in all probability—for their actions could not be seen—rest from their tremendous effort, and try again.

All at once, after Nic had been watching for some minutes without seeing sign of a fish, there was a flash close in to where he stood, and a large salmon shot up, reached the top of the fall, and would have passed on, but fortune was against it. For a moment it rested on the edge, and its broad tail and part of its body glistened as a powerful stroke was made with the broad caudal fin.

But it was in the air, not in the water; and the next moment the great fish was falling, when, quick as its own spring up, there was a sudden movement from behind one of the great stones at the foot of the fall just below where Nic stood, and the salmon was caught upon a sharp hook at the end of a stout ash pole and dragged shoreward, flapping and struggling with all its might.

The efforts were in vain, for its captor drew it in quickly, raising the pole more and more till it was nearly perpendicular, as he came out from behind the great block of dripping stone which had hidden him from Nic, and, as it happened, stepped backward, till his fish was clear of the water.

It was all the matter of less than a minute. The man, intent upon his fish—a magnificent freshly-run salmon, glittering in its silver scales—passed hand over hand along his pole, released his right, and was in the act of reaching down to thrust a hooked finger in the opening and closing gills to make sure of his prize in the cramped-up space he occupied, when the end of the stout ash staff struck Nic sharply on his leg.

But the man did not turn, attributing the hindrance to his pole having encountered a stone or tree branch above his head, and any movement made by Nic was drowned by the roar of the fall.

The blow upon the leg was sharp, and gave intense pain to its recipient, whose temper was already rising at the cool impudence of the stout, bullet-headed fellow, trespassing and poaching in open daylight upon the Captain's grounds.

Consequently, Nic did take notice of the blow.

Stooping down as the end of the pole wavered in the air, he made a snatch at and seized it, gave it a wrench round as the man's finger was entering the gill of the salmon, and the hook being reversed, the fish dropped off, there was a slight addition to the splashing in the pool, and then it disappeared.

The next moment the man twisted himself round, holding on by the pole, and stared up; while Nic, still holding on by the other end, leaned over and stared down.

It was a curious picture, and for some moments neither stirred, the poacher's not ill-looking face expressing profound astonishment at this strange attack.

Then a fierce look of anger crossed it, and, quick as thought, he made a sharp snatch, which destroyed Nic's balance, making him loosen his hold of the pole and snatch at the nearest branch to check his fall.

He succeeded, but only for a moment, just sufficient to save himself and receive another heavy blow from the pole, which made him lose his hold and slip, more than fall, down to where he was on the same level with his adversary, who drew back to strike again.

But Nic felt as if his heart was on fire. The pain of the blows thrilled him, and, darting forward with clenched fists, he struck the poacher full in the mouth before the pole could swing round.

There was the faint whisper of a hoarse yell as the man fell back; Nic saw his hands clutching in the air, then he went backward into the boiling water, while the end of the pole was seen to rise above the surface for a moment or two, and then glide towards the bottom of the fall and disappear.

For the current, as it swung round the pool, set towards the falling water on the surface, and rushed outward far below.

Nic's rage died out more quickly than it had risen, and he craned forward, white as ashes now, watching for the rising of his adversary out somewhere towards the other side; while, as

if in triumphant mockery or delight at the danger having been removed, another huge salmon leaped up the fall.

Chapter Three.

A Game of Tit for Tat.

"I'd have pushed him in."

Captain Revel's threat flashed through his son's brain as the young man stood staring wildly over the agitated waters of the pool, every moment fancying that he saw some portion of the man's body rise to the surface; but only for it to prove a patch of the creamy froth churned up by the flood.

It was plain enough: the man had been sucked in under the falls, and the force of the falling water was keeping him down. He must have been beneath the surface for a full minute now—so it seemed to Nic; and, as he grew more hopeless moment by moment of seeing him rise, the young man's blood seemed to chill with horror at the thought that he had in his rage destroyed another's life.

Only a short time back the shut-in pool had been a scene of beauty; now it was like a black hollow of misery and despair, as the water dashed down and then swirled and eddied in the hideous whirlpool.

Then it was light again, and a wild feeling of exultation shot through Nic's breast, for he suddenly caught sight of the man's inert body approaching him, after gliding right round the basin. It was quite fifty feet away, and seemed for a few moments as if about to be swept out of the hollow and down the gully; but the swirl was too strong, and it continued gliding round the pool, each moment coming nearer.

There was no time for hesitation. Nic knew the danger and the impossibility of keeping afloat in foaming water like that before him, churned up as it was with air; but he felt that at all cost he must plunge in and try to save his adversary before the poor fellow was swept by him and borne once more beneath the fall.

Stripping off his coat, he waited a few seconds, and then leaped outward so as to come down feet first, in the hope that he

might find bottom and be able to wade, for he knew that swimming was out of the question.

It was one rush, splash, and hurry, for the water was not breast-deep, and by a desperate effort he kept up as his feet reached the rugged, heavily-scoured stones at the bottom. Then the pressure of the water nearly bore him away, but he managed to keep up, bearing sidewise, and the next minute had grasped the man's arm and was struggling shorewards, dragging his adversary towards the rugged bank.

Twice-over he felt that it was impossible; but, as the peril increased, despair seemed to endow him with superhuman strength, and he kept up the struggle bravely, ending by drawing the man out on to the ledge of stones nearly on a level with the water, where he had been at first standing at the foot of the fall.

"He's dead; he's dead!" panted Nic, as he sank upon his knees, too much exhausted by his struggle to do more than gaze down at the dripping, sun-tanned face, though the idea was growing that he must somehow carry the body up into the sunshine and try to restore consciousness.

Comic things occur sometimes in tragedies, and Nic's heart gave a tremendous leap, for a peculiar twitching suddenly contracted the face beside which he knelt, and the man sneezed violently, again and again. A strangling fit of coughing succeeded, during which he choked and crowed and grew scarlet, and in his efforts to get his breath he rose into a sitting position, opened his eyes to stare, and ended by struggling to his feet and standing panting and gazing fiercely at Nic.

"Are you better?" cried the latter excitedly, and he seized the man by the arms, as he too rose, and held him fast, in the fear lest he should fall back into the whirlpool once more.

That was enough! Pete Burge was too hardy a fisher to be easily drowned. He had recovered his senses, and the rage against the young fellow who had caused his trouble surged up again, as it seemed to him that he was being seized and made prisoner, not a word of Nic's speech being heard above the roar of the water.

"Vish as much mine as his," said the man to himself; and, in nowise weakened by his immersion, he closed with Nic. There was a short struggle on the ledge, which was about the worst place that could have been chosen for such an encounter; and Nic, as he put forth all his strength against the man's iron

muscles, was borne to his left over the water and to his right with a heavy bang against the rocky side of the chasm. Then, before he could recover himself, there was a rapid disengagement and two powerful arms clasped his waist; he was heaved up in old West-country wrestling fashion, struggling wildly, and, in spite of his efforts to cling to his adversary, by a mighty effort jerked off. He fell clear away in the foaming pool, which closed over his head as he was borne in turn right beneath the tons upon tons of water which thundered in his ears, while he experienced the sudden change from sunshine into the dense blackness of night.

"How do you like that?" shouted the man; but it was only a faint whisper, of which he alone was conscious.

There was a broad grin upon his face, and his big white teeth glistened in the triumphant smile which lit up his countenance.

"I'll let you zee."

He stood dripping and watching the swirling and foaming water for the reappearance of Nic.

"Biggest vish I got this year," he said to himself. "Lost my pole, too; and here! where's my cap, and—?"

There was a sudden change in his aspect, his face becoming full of blank horror now as he leaned forward, staring over the pool, eyes and mouth open widely; and then, with a groan, he gasped out:

"Well, I've done it now!"

Chapter Four.

Nic will not shake Hands.

History repeats itself, though the repetitions are not always recorded.

A horrible feeling of remorse and despair came over the man. His anger had evaporated, and putting his hands to the sides of his mouth, he yelled out:

"Ahoy, there! Help—help!"

Again it was a mere whisper in the booming roar.

"Oh, poor dear lad!" he muttered to himself. "Bother the zammon! Wish there weren't none. Hoi, Master Nic! Strike out! Zwim, lad, zwim! Oh, wheer be ye? I've drowned un. Oh, a mercy me! What have I done?—Hah! there a be."

There was a plunge, a splash, and a rush against the eddying water, with the man showing a better knowledge of the pool, from many a day's wading, than Nic had possessed. Pete Burge knew where the shallow shelves of polished stones lay out of sight, and he waded and struggled on to where the water was bearing Nic round in turn. Then, after wading, the man plunged into deep water, swam strongly, and seized his victim as a huge dog would, with his teeth, swung himself round, and let the fierce current bear him along as he fought his way into the shallow, regained his footing, and the next minute was back by the ledge. Here he rose to his feet, and rolled and thrust Nic ashore, climbed out after him, and knelt in turn by his side.

"Bean't dead, be he?" said the man to himself. "Not in the water long enough. Worst o' these here noblemen and gentlemen—got no stuff in 'em."

Pete Burge talked to himself, but he was busy the while. He acted like a man who had gained experience in connection with flooded rivers, torrents, and occasional trips in fishing-boats at sea; and according to old notions, supposing his victim not to be already dead, he did the best he could to smother out the tiny spark of life that might still be glowing.

His fine old-fashioned notion of a man being drowned was that it was because he was full of water. The proper thing, then, according to his lights, must be to empty it out, and the sooner the better. The sea-going custom was to lay a man face downward across a barrel, and to roll the barrel gently to and fro.

"And I aren't got no barrel," muttered Pete.

To make up for it he rolled Nic from side to side, and then, as his treatment produced no effect, he seized him by the ankles, stood up, and raised the poor fellow till he was upside down, and shook him violently again and again.

Wonderful to relate, that did no good, his patient looking obstinately lifeless; so he laid him in the position he should have tried at first—extended upon his back; and, apostrophising

him all the time as a poor, weakly, helpless creature, punched and rubbed and worked him about, muttering the while.

"Oh, poor lad! poor dear lad!" he went on. "I had no spite again' him. I didn't want to drownd him. It weer only tit for tat; he chucked me in, and I chucked him in, and it's all on account o' they zammon.—There goes another. Always a-temptin' a man to come and catch 'em—lyin' in the pools as if askin' of ye.—Oh, I say, do open your eyes, lad, and speak! They'll zay I murdered ye, and if I don't get aboard ship and zail away to foreign abroad, they'll hang me, and the crows'll come and pick out my eyes.—I zay.—I zay lad, don't ye be a vool. It was on'y a drop o' watter ye zwallowed. Do ye come to, and I'll never meddle with the zammon again.—I zay, ye aren't dead now. Don't ye be a vool. It aren't worth dying for, lad. Coom, coom, coom, open your eyes and zit up like a man. You're a gentleman, and ought to know better. I aren't no scholard, and I didn't do zo.—Oh, look at him! I shall be hanged for it, and put on the gibbet, and all for a bit o' vish.—Zay, look here, if you don't come to I'll pitch you back again, and they'll think you tumbled in, and never know no better. It's voolish of ye, lad. Don't give up till ye're ninety-nine or a hundred. It's time enough to die then. Don't die now, with the sun shining and the fish running up the valls, and ye might be so happy and well."

And all the while Pete kept on thumping and rubbing and banging his patient about in the most vigorous way.

"It's spite, that's what it is," growled the man. "You hit me i' th' mouth and tried to drownd me, and because you couldn't you're trying to get me hanged; and you shan't, for if you don't come-to soon, sure as you're alive I'll pitch you back to be carried out to zea.—Nay, nay, I wouldn't, lad. Ye'd coom back and harnt me. I never meant to do more than duck you, and Hooray!"

For Nic's nature had at last risen against the treatment he was receiving. It was more than any one could stand; so, in the midst of a furious bout of rubbing, the poor fellow suddenly yawned and opened his eyes, to stare blankly up at the bright sun-rays streaming down through the overhanging boughs of the gnarled oaks. He dropped his lids again, but another vigorous rubbing made him open them once more; and as he stared now at his rough doctor his lips moved to utter the word "Don't!" but it was not heard, and after one or two more appeals he caught the man's wrists and tried to struggle up into a sitting position, Pete helping him, and then, as he knelt there, grinning in his face.

Nic sat staring at him and beginning to think more clearly, so that in a few minutes he had fully grasped the position and recalled all that had taken place.

It was evident that there was to be a truce between them, for Pete Burge's rough countenance was quite smiling and triumphant, while on Nic's own part the back of his neck ached severely, and he felt as if he could not have injured a fly.

At last Nic rose, shook himself after the fashion of a dog to get rid of some of the water which soaked his clothes, and looked round about him for his cap, feeling that he would be more dignified and look rather less like a drowned rat if he put it on.

Pete came close to him, placed his lips nearly to his ear, and shouted, "Cap?"

Nic nodded.

"Gone down the river to try and catch mine for me," said the man, with a good-humoured grin, which made Nic frown at the insolent familiarity with which it was said.

"You'll have to buy me another one, Master Nic," continued the man, "and get the smith to make me a noo steel hook. I'll let you off paying for the pole; I can cut a fresh one somewheres up yonder."

"On our grounds?" cried Nic indignantly, speaking as loudly as he could.

"Well, there's plenty, aren't there, master? And you've lost mine," shouted back the man, grinning again.

"You scoundrel!" cried Nic, who was warming up again. "I shall have you up before the Justices for this."

"For what?" said the man insolently.

"For throwing me into the pool."

"Zo shall I, then," shouted the man. "It was only tit for tat. You zent me in first."

"Yes; and I caught you first hooking our salmon, sir."

"Tchah! much my zammon as your own, master. Vish comes out of the zea for everybody as likes to catch them."

"Not on my father's estate," cried Nic. "You've been warned times enough."

"Ay, I've heerd a lot o' talk, master; but me and my mates mean to have a vish or two whenever we wants 'em. You'll never miss 'em."

"Look here, Pete Burge," cried Nic; "I don't want to be too hard upon you, because I suppose you fished me out of the pool after throwing me in."

"Well, you've no call to grumble, master," said the man, grinning good-humouredly. "You did just the zame."

"And," continued Nic, shouting himself hoarse, so as to be heard, and paying no heed to the man's words, "if you faithfully promise me that you'll never come and poach on my father's part of the river again, I'll look over all this, and not have you before the Justices."

"How are you going to get me avore the Justice, Master Nic?" said the man, with a merry laugh.

"Send the constable, sir."

"Tchah! he'd never vind me; and, if he did, he dursen't tackle me. There's a dozen o' my mates would break his head if he tried."

"Never mind about that," cried Nic. "You promise me. My father warned you only yesterday."

"So he did," said the man, showing his teeth. "In a regular wax he was."

"And I will not have him annoyed," cried Nic. "So now then, you promise?"

"Nay, I shan't promise."

"Then I go straight to the constable, and if I do you'll be summoned and punished, and perhaps sent out of the country."

"What vor?—pulling you out when you was drownding?"

"For stealing our salmon and beating our two keepers."

"Then I'd better have left you in yonder," said the man, laughing.

"You mean I had better have left you in yonder, and rid the country of an idle, poaching scoundrel," cried Nic indignantly. "But there, you saved my life, and I want to give you a chance. Look here, Pete Burge, you had better go to sea."

"Yes, when I like to try for some vish. Don't ketch me going for a zailor."

"Will you give me your word that you will leave the fish alone?"

"Nay; but I'll shake hands with you, master. You zaved my life, and I zaved yourn, so we're square over that business."

"You insolent dog!" cried Nic. "Then I'll go straight to the Justice."

"Nay; you go and put on zome dry clothes. It don't hurt me, but you'll ketch cold, my lad. Look here, you want me to zay I won't take no more zammon."

"Yes."

"Then I won't zay it. There's about twenty of us means to have as many fish out o' the river as we like, and if anybody, keepers or what not, comes and interveres with us we'll pitch 'em in the river; and they may get out themzelves, for I'm not going in after they. Understand that, master?"

"Yes, sir, I do."

"Then don't you set any one to meddle with us, or there may be mischief done, for my mates aren't such vools as me. Going to give me a noo steel hook?"

"No, you scoundrel!"

"Going to zhake hands?"

"No, sir."

"Just as you like, young master. I wanted to be vriends and you won't, so we'll be t'other. On'y mind, if there's mischief comes of it, you made it. Now then, I'm going to walk about in the sun to get dry, and then zee about getting myself a noo cap and a hook."

"To try for our salmon again?"

The fellow gave him a queer look, nodded, and climbed up the side of the ravine, followed by Nic.

At the top the man turned and stared at him for a few moments, with a peculiar look in his eyes; and the trees between them and the falls shut off much of the deep, booming noise.

"Well," said Nic sharply, "have you repented?"

"Nothing to repent on," said the man stolidly. "On'y wanted to zay this here: If you zees lights some night among the trees and down by the watter, it means vishing."

"I know that," said Nic sternly.

"And there'll be a lot there—rough uns; so don't you come and meddle, my lad, for I shouldn't like to zee you hurt."

The next minute the man had disappeared among the trees, leaving Nic to stand staring after him, thinking of what would be the result if the salmon-poachers met their match.

Chapter Five.

The Captain cannot let it rest.

"Hullo, Nic, my boy; been overboard?"

The young man started, for he had been thinking a good deal on his way back to the house. His anger had cooled down as much as his body from the evaporation going on. For, after all, he thought he could not find much fault with Pete Burge. It would seem only natural to such a rough fellow to serve his assailant as he had himself been served.

"And he did save my life afterwards, instead of letting me drown," thought Nic, who decided not to try to get Pete punished.

"I'll give him one more chance," he said; and he had just arrived at this point as he was walking sharply through the trees by the combe, with the intention of slipping in unseen,

when he came suddenly upon his father seated upon a stone, and was saluted with the above question as to having been overboard.

"Yes, father," he said, glancing down at his drenched garments, "I've been in."

"Bah! you go blundering about looking inside instead of where you're steering," cried the Captain. "Aren't drowned, I suppose?"

Nic laughed.

"Well, slip in and get on some dry things. Look alive."

Nic did not want to enter into the business through which he had passed, so he hurried indoors, glad to change his clothes.

Then, as the time went on he felt less and less disposed to speak about his adventure, for it seemed hard work to make an effort to punish the man who had, after all, saved his life.

About a fortnight had passed, when one morning, upon going down, he encountered his father's old sailor-servant, who answered his salute with a grin.

"What are you laughing at, Bill?" asked Nic.

"They've been at it again, sir."

"What! those scoundrels after the salmon?"

"Yes, sir; in the night. Didn't you hear 'em?"

"Of course not. Did you?"

"Oh yes, I heerd 'em and seed 'em too; leastwise, I seed their lights. So did Tom Gardener."

"Then why didn't you call me up?" cried Nic angrily.

"'Cause you'd ha' woke the Captain, and he'd have had us all out for a fight."

"Of course he would."

"And he was a deal better in his bed. You know what he is, Master Nic. I put it to you, now. He's got all the sperrit he

always did have, and is ripe as ever for a row; but is he fit, big and heavy as he's growed, to go down fighting salmon-poachers?"

"No; but we could have knocked up Tom Gardener and the other men, and gone ourselves."

"Oh!" ejaculated the old sailor, laughing. "He'd have heared, perhaps. Think you could ha' made him keep back when there was a fight, Master Nic?"

"No, I suppose not; but he will be horribly angry, and go on at you fiercely when he knows."

"Oh, of course," said the man coolly. "That's his way; but I'm used to that. It does him good, he likes it, and it don't do me no harm. Never did in the old days at sea."

"Has any one been down to the river?"

"Oh yes; me and Tom Gardener went down as soon as it was daylight; and they've been having a fine game."

"Game?"

"Ay, that they have, Master Nic," said the man, laughing. "There's no water coming over the fall, and the pool was full of fish."

"Well, I know that, Bill," cried Nic impatiently; "but you don't mean to say that—"

"Yes, I do," said the man, grinning. "They've cleared it."

"And you laugh, sir!"

"Well, 'taren't nowt to cry about, Master Nic. On'y a few fish."

"And you know how particular my father is about the salmon."

"Oh, ay. Of course I know; but he eats more of 'em than's good for him now. 'Sides, they left three on the side. Slipped out o' their baskets, I suppose."

Nic was right: the Captain was furious, and the servants, from William Solly to the youngest gardener, were what they called "tongue-thrashed," Captain Revel storming as if he were once more rating his crew aboard ship.

"They all heard, Nic, my boy," he said to his son. "I believe they knew the scoundrels were coming, and they were too cowardly to give the alarm."

This was after a walk down to the pool, where the water was clear and still save where a little stream ran sparkling over the shelf of rock instead of a thunderous fall, the gathering from the high grounds of the moors.

"I'm afraid they heard them, father," said Nic.

"Afraid? I'm sure of it, boy."

"And that they did not like the idea of your getting mixed up in the fight."

"Ah!" cried the Captain, catching his son by the shoulder; "then you knew of it too, sir? You wanted me to be kept out of it."

"I do want you to be kept out of any struggle, father," said Nic.

"Why, sir, why?" panted the old officer.

"Because you are not so active as you used to be."

"What, sir? Nonsense, sir! A little heavy and—er—short-winded perhaps, but never better or more full of fight in my life, sir. The scoundrels! Oh, if I had been there! But I feel hurt, Nic—cruelly hurt. You and that salt-soaked old villain, Bill Sally, hatch up these things between you. Want to make out I'm infirm. I'll discharge that vagabond."

"No, you will not, father. He's too good and faithful a servant. He thinks of nothing but his old Captain's health."

"A scoundrel! and so he ought to. Wasn't he at sea with me for five-and-twenty years—wrecked with me three times?—But you, Nic, to mutiny against your father!"

"No, no, father; I assure you I knew nothing whatever about it till I came down this morning."

"And you'd have woke me if you had known?"

"Of course I would, father."

"Thank you, Nic—thank you. To be sure: you gave me your word of honour you would. But as for that ruffian Bill Solly, I'll blow him out of the water."

"Better let it rest, father," said Nic. "We escaped a bad fight perhaps. I believe there was a gang of fifteen or twenty of the scoundrels, and I'd rather they had all the fish in the sea than that you should be hurt."

"Thank you, Nic; thank you, my boy. That's very good of you; but I can't, and I will not, lie by and have my fish cleared away like this."

"There'll be more as soon as the rain comes again in the moors, and these are gone now."

"Yes, and sold—perhaps eaten by this time, eh?"

"Yes, father; and there's as good fish in the sea."

"As ever came out of it—eh, Nic?"

"Yes, father; so let the matter drop."

"Can't help myself, Nic; but I must have a turn at the enemy one of these times. I cannot sit down and let them attack me like this. Oh, I'd dearly like to blow some of 'em out of the water!"

"Better put a bag of powder under the rock, father, and blow away the falls so that the salmon can always get up, and take the temptation away from these idle scoundrels."

"I'd sooner put the powder under my own bed, sir, and blow myself up. No, Nic, I will not strike my colours to the miserable gang like that. Oh! I'd dearly like to know when they are going to make their next raid, and then have my old crew to lie in wait for them."

"And as that's impossible, father—"

"We must grin and bear it, Nic—eh?"

"Yes, father."

"But only wait!"

Chapter Six.

Plots and Plans.

The rain came, as Nic had said it would, and as it does come up in the high hills of stony Dartmoor. Then the tiny rills swelled and became rivulets, the rivulets rivers, and the rivers floods. The trickling fall at the Captain's swelled up till the water, which looked like porter, thundered down and filled the pool, and the salmon came rushing up from the sea till there were as many as ever. Then, as the rainy time passed away, Captain Revel made his plans, for he felt sure that there would be another raid by the gang who had attacked his place before, headed by Pete Burge and a deformed man of herculean strength, who came with a party of ne'er-do-weels from the nearest town.

"That rascal Pete will be here with his gang," said the Captain, "and we'll be ready for them."

But the speaker was doing Pete Burge an injustice; for, though several raids had been made in the neighbourhood, and pools cleared out, Pete had hung back from going to the Captain's for some reason or another, and suffered a good deal of abuse in consequence, one result being a desperate fight with Humpy Dee, the deformed man, who after a time showed the white feather, and left Pete victorious but a good deal knocked about.

So, feeling sure that he was right, Captain Revel made his plans; and, unwillingly enough, but with the full intention of keeping his father out of danger, Nic set to work as his father's lieutenant and carried out his orders.

The result was that every servant was armed with a stout cudgel, and half-a-dozen sturdy peasants of the neighbourhood were enlisted to come, willingly enough, to help to watch and checkmate the rough party from the town, against whom a bitter feeling of enmity existed for depriving the cottagers from getting quietly a salmon for themselves.

The arrangements were made for the next night, a stranger having been seen inspecting the river and spying about among the fir-trees at the back of the pool.

But no one came, and at daybreak the Captain's crew, as he called it, went back to bed.

The following night did not pass off so peacefully, for soon after twelve, while the watchers, headed by the Captain and Nic, were well hidden about the pool, the enemy came, and, after lighting their lanthorns, began to net the salmon.

Then a whistle rang out, a desperate attack was made upon them, and the Captain nearly had a fit. For his party was greatly outnumbered. The raiders fought desperately, and they went off at last fishless; but not until the Captain's little force had been thoroughly beaten and put to flight, with plenty of cuts and bruises amongst them, Nic's left arm hanging down nearly helpless.

"But never mind, Nic," said the Captain, rubbing his bruised hand as he spoke. "I knocked one of the rascals down, and they got no fish; and I don't believe they'll come again."

But they did, the very next night, and cleared the pool once more, for the watchers were all abed; and in the morning the Captain was frantic in his declarations of what he would do.

To Nic's great delight, just when his father was at his worst, and, as his old body-servant said, "working himself into a fantigue about a bit o' fish," there was a diversion.

Nic was sitting at breakfast, getting tired of having salmon at every meal—by the ears, not by the mouth—when suddenly there was the dull thud of a big gun out at sea, and Captain Revel brought his fist down upon the table with a bang like an echo of the report.

"Lawrence!" he cried excitedly. "Here, Nic, ring the bell, and tell Solly to go and hoist the flag."

The bell was rung, and a maid appeared.

"Where's Solly?" cried the Captain angrily.

"Plee, sir, he's gone running up to the cliff to hoist the flag," said the girl nervously.

"Humph! that will do," said the Captain, and the maid gladly beat a retreat.—"Not a bad bit of discipline that, Nic. Wonder what brings Lawrence here! Ring that bell again, boy, and order them to reset the breakfast-table. He'll be here in half-an-hour, hungry. He always was a hungry chap."

The maid appeared, received her orders, and was about to go, when she was arrested.

"Here, Mary, what is there that can be cooked for Captain Lawrence's breakfast?"

"The gardener has just brought in a salmon he found speared and left by the river, sir."

The Captain turned purple with rage.

"Don't you ever dare to say salmon to me again, woman!" he roared.

"No, sir; cert'n'y not, sir," faltered the frightened girl, turning wonderingly to Nic, her eyes seeming to say, "Please, sir, is master going mad?"

"Yes; tell the cook to fry some salmon cutlets," continued the Captain; and then apologetically to his son: "Lawrence likes fish."

As the maid backed out of the room the Captain rose from the table.

"Come along, my boy," he said; "we'll finish our breakfast with him."

Nic followed his father into the hall, and then through the garden and up to the edge of the cliff, passing William Solly on his way back after hoisting the flag, which was waving in the sea-breeze.

"Quite right, William," said the Captain as the old sailor saluted and passed on. "Nothing like discipline, Nic, my boy. Ha! You ought to have been a sailor."

The next minute they had reached the flagstaff, from whence they could look down at the mouth of the river, off which one of the king's ships was lying close in, and between her and the shore there was a boat approaching fast.

As father and son watched, it was evident that they were seen, for some one stood up in the stern-sheets and waved a little flag, to which Nic replied by holding his handkerchief to be blown out straight by the breeze.

"Ha! Very glad he has come, Nic," said the Captain. "Fine fellow, Jack Lawrence! Never forgets old friends. Now I'll be bound to say he can give us good advice about what to do with those scoundrels."

"Not much in his way, father, is it?" said Nic.

"What, sir?" cried the Captain fiercely. "Look here, boy; I never knew anything which was not in Jack Lawrence's way. Why, when we were young lieutenants together on board the *Sovereign*, whether it was fight or storm he was always ready with a good idea. He will give us—me—well, us—good advice, I'm sure. There he is, being carried ashore. Go and meet him, my boy. I like him to see that he is welcome. Tell him I'd have come down myself, but the climb back is a bit too much for me."

Nic went off at a trot along the steep track which led down to the shore, and in due time met the hale, vigorous, grey-haired officer striding uphill in a way which made Nic feel envious on his father's behalf.

"Well, Nic, my boy," cried the visitor, "how's the dad? Well? That's right. So are you," he continued, gazing searchingly at the lad with his keen, steely-grey eyes. "Grown ever so much since I saw you last. Ah, boy, it's a pity you didn't come to sea!"

Then he went on chatting about being just come upon the Plymouth station training men for the king's ships, and how he hoped to see a good deal now of his old friend and his son.

The meeting between the brother-officers was boisterous, but there was something almost pathetic in the warmth with which they grasped hands, for they had first met in the same ship as middies, and many a time during Captain Lawrence's visits Nic had sat and listened to their recollections of the dangers they had gone through and their boyish pranks.

William Solly was in the porch ready to salute the visitor, and to look with pride at the fine, manly old officer's greeting. He made a point, too, of stopping in the room to wait table, carefully supplying all wants, and smiling with pleasure as he saw how the pleasant meal was enjoyed by the guest.

"We were lying off the river late last night, but I wouldn't disturb you," he said. "I made up my mind, though, to come to breakfast. Hah! What delicious fried salmon!"

"*Hur-r-ur!*" growled Captain Revel, and Solly cocked his eye knowingly at Nic.

"Hallo! What's the matter?" cried the visitor.

"The salmon—the salmon," growled Captain Revel, frowning and tapping the table.

"De-licious, man! Have some?—Here, Solly, hand the dish to your master."

"*Bur-r-ur!*" roared the Captain. "Take it away—take it away, or I shall be in another of my rages, and they're not good for me, Jack—not good for me."

"Why, what is it, old lad?"

"Tell him, Nic—tell him," cried Captain Revel; and his son explained the cause of his father's irritation.

"Why, that was worrying you last time I was here—let me see, a year ago."

"Yes, Jack; and it has been worrying me ever since," cried Captain Revel. "You see, I mustn't cut any of the scoundrels down, and I mustn't shoot them. The law would be down on me."

"Yes, of course; but you might make the law come down on them."

"Can't, my lad. Summonses are no use."

"Catch them in the act, make them prisoners, and then see what the law will do."

"But we can't catch them, Jack; they're too many for us," cried the Captain earnestly. "They come twenty or thirty strong, and we've had fight after fight with them, but they knock us to pieces. Look at Solly's forehead; they gave him that cut only a few nights ago."

The old sailor blushed like a girl.

"That's bad," said the visitor, after giving the man a sharp look. "What sort of fellows are they?"

"Big, strong, idle vagabonds. Scum of the town and the country round."

"Indeed!" said the visitor, raising his eyes. "They thrash you, then, because you are not strong enough?"

"Yes; that's it, Jack. Now, what am I to do?"

"Let me see," said the visitor, tightening his lips. "They only come when the pool's full of salmon, you say, after a bit of rain in the moors?"

"Yes; that's it, Jack."

"Then you pretty well know when to expect them?"

"Yes; that's right."

"How would it be, then, if you sent me word in good time in the morning? Or, no—look here, old fellow—I shall know when there is rain on the moor, and I'll come round in this direction from the port. I'm cruising about the Channel training a lot of men. You hoist a couple of flags on the staff some morning, and that evening at dusk I'll land a couple of boats' crews, and have them marched up here to lay up with you and turn the tables upon the rascals. How will that do?"

Solly forgot discipline, and bent down to give one of his legs a tremendous slap, while his master made the breakfast things dance from his vigorous bang on the table.

"There, Nic," he cried triumphantly; "what did I say? Jack Lawrence was always ready to show the way when we were on our beam-ends. Jack, my dear old messmate," he cried heartily, as he stretched out his hand—"your fist."

Chapter Seven.

The Captain will "wherrit."

Captain Lawrence spent the day at the Point, thoroughly enjoying a long gossip, and, after an early dinner, proposed a walk around the grounds and a look at the river and the pool.

"What a lovely spot it is!" he said, as he wandered about the side of the combe. "I must have such a place as this when I give up the sea."

"There isn't such a place, Jack," said Captain Revel proudly. "But I want you to look round the pool.—I don't think I'll climb down, Nic. It's rather hot; and I'll sit down on the stone for a few minutes while you two plan where you could ambush the men."

"Right," said Captain Lawrence; and he actively followed Nic, pausing here and there, till they had descended to where the fall just splashed gently down into the clear pool, whose bigger stones about the bottom were now half-bare.

"Lovely place this, Nic, my boy. I could sit down here and doze away the rest of my days. But what a pity it is that your father worries himself so about these poaching scoundrels! Can't you wean him from it? Tell him, or I will, that it isn't worth the trouble. Plenty more fish will come, and there must be a little grit in every one's wheel."

"Oh, I've tried everything, sir," replied Nic. "The fact is that he is not so well as I should like to see him; and when he has an irritable fit, the idea of any one trespassing and taking the fish half-maddens him."

"Well, we must see what we can do, my boy. It ought to be stopped. A set of idlers like this requires a severe lesson. A good dose of capstan bar and some broken heads will sicken them, and then perhaps they will let you alone."

"I hope so, sir."

"I think I can contrive that it shall," said the visitor dryly. "I shall bring or send some trusty men. There, I have seen all I want to see. Let's get back."

He turned to climb up the side of the gorge; and as Nic followed, the place made him recall his encounter with Pete Burge, and how different the pool looked then; and, somehow, he could not help hoping that the big, bluff fellow might not be present during the sharp encounter with Captain Lawrence's trusty men.

"Hah! Began to think you long, Jack," said Captain Revel; and they returned to the house and entered, after a glance seaward, where the ship lay at anchor.

Towards evening Solly was sent to hoist a signal upon the flagstaff, and soon after a boat was seen pulling towards the shore. Then the visitor took his leave, renewing his promise to reply to a signal by sending a strong party of men.

Nic walked down to the boat with his father's friend, and answered several questions about the type of men who came after the salmon.

"I see, I see," said Captain Lawrence; "but do you think they'll fight well?"

"Oh yes; there are some daring rascals among them."

"So much the better, my dear boy. There, good-bye. Mind—two small flags on your signal-halyards after the first heavy rain upon the moor, and you may expect us at dusk. If the rascals don't come we'll have another try; but you'll know whether they'll be there by the fish in the pool. They'll know too—trust 'em. Look, there's your father watching us—" and he waved his hand. "Good-bye, Nic, my dear boy. Good-bye!"

He shook hands very warmly. Two of his men who were ashore joined hands to make what children call a "dandy-chair," the Captain placed his hands upon their shoulders, and they waded through the shallow water to the boat, pausing to give her a shove off before climbing in; and then, as the oars made the water flash in the evening light, Nic climbed the long hill again, to stand with his father, watching the boat till she reached the side of the ship.

"Now then, my boy," said the old man, "we're going to give those fellows such a lesson as they have never had before."

He little knew how truly he was speaking.

"I hope so, father," said Nic; and he was delighted to find how pleased the old officer seemed.

The next morning, when Nic opened his bedroom window, the king's ship was not in sight; and for a week Captain Revel was fidgeting and watching the sky, for no rain came, and there was not water enough in the river for fresh salmon to come as far as the pool.

"Did you ever see anything like it, Nic, my boy?" the Captain said again and again; "that's always the way: if I didn't want it to rain, there'd be a big storm up in the hills, and the fall would

be roaring like a sou'-wester off the Land's End; but now I want just enough water to fill the river, not a drop will come. How long did Jack Lawrence say that he was going to stop about Plymouth?"

"He didn't say, father, that I remember," replied Nic. "Then he'll soon be off; and just in the miserable, cantankerous way in which things happen, the very day he sets sail there'll be a storm on Dartmoor, and the next morning the pool will be full of salmon, and those scoundrels will come to set me at defiance, and clear off every fish."

"I say, father," said Nic merrily, "isn't that making troubles, and fancying storms before they come?"

"What, sir? How dare you speak to me like that?" cried the Captain.—"And you, Solly, you mutinous scoundrel, how dare you laugh?" he roared, turning to his body-servant, who happened to be in the hail.

"Beg your honour's pardon; I didn't laugh."

"You did laugh, sir," roared the Captain—"that is, I saw you look at Master Nic here and smile. It's outrageous. Every one is turning against me, and I'm beginning to think it's time I was out of this miserable world."

He snatched up his stick from the stand, banged on the old straw hat he wore, and stamped out of the porch to turn away to the left, leaving Nic hesitating as to what he should do, deeply grieved as he was at his father's annoyance and display of temper. One moment he was for following and trying to say something which would tend to calm the irritation. The next he was thinking it would be best to leave the old man to himself, trusting to the walk in the pleasant grounds having the desired result.

But this idea was knocked over directly by Solly, who had followed his master to the porch, and stood watching him for a few moments.

"Oh dear, dear! Master Nic," he cried, turning back, "he's gone down the combe path to see whether there's any more water running down; and there aren't, and he'll be a-wherriting his werry inside out, and that wherrits mine too. For I can't abear to see the poor old skipper like this here."

"No, Solly, neither can I," said Nic gloomily.

"It's his old hurts does it, sir. It aren't nat'ral. Here he is laid up, as you may say, in clover, in as nice a place as an old sailor could end his days in."

"Yes, Solly," said Nic sadly; "it is a beautiful old place."

"Ay, it is, sir; and when I cons it over I feel it. Why, Master Nic, when I think of all the real trouble as there is in life, and what some folks has to go through, I asks myself what I've ever done to have such good luck as to be safely moored here in such a harbour. It's a lovely home, and the troubles is nothing—on'y a bit of a gale blowed by the skipper now and then along of the wrong boots as hurts his corns, or him being a-carrying on too much sail, and bustin' off a button in a hurry. And who minds that?"

"Ah! who minds a trifle like that, Solly?" sighed Nic. "Well, sir, you see he does. Wind gets up directly, and he talks to me as if I'd mutinied. But I don't mind. I know all the time that he's the best and bravest skipper as ever lived, and I'd do anything for him to save him from trouble."

"I know you would, Solly," said Nic, laying a hand upon the rugged old sailor's shoulder.

"Thank ye, Master Nic; that does a man good. But look here, sir; I can't help saying it. The fact is, after his rough, stormy life, everything here's made too easy for the skipper. He's a bit worried by his old wounds, and that's all; and consekens is 'cause he aren't got no real troubles he wherrits himself and makes quakers."

"Makes quakers?" said Nic wonderingly.

"Sham troubles, Master Nic—wooden guns, as we call quakers out at sea or in a fort. Strikes me, sir, as a real, downright, good, gen-u-wine trouble, such as losing all his money, would be the making of the Captain; and after that he'd be ready to laugh at losing a few salmon as he don't want. I say, Master Nic, you aren't offended at me for making so bold?"

"No, Solly, no," said the young man sadly. "You mean well, I know. There, say no more about it. I hope all this will settle itself, as so many troubles do."

Nic strolled out into the grounds and unconsciously followed his father, who had gone to the edge of the combe; but he had not

walked far before a cheery hail saluted his ears, and, to his great delight, he found the Captain looking radiant.

"Nic, my boy, it's all right," he cried; "my left arm aches terribly and my corns are shooting like mad. Well, what are you staring at? Don't you see it means rain? Look yonder, too. Bah! It's of no use to tell you, boy. You've never been to sea. You've never had to keep your weather-eye open. See that bit of silvery cloud yonder over Rigdon Tor? And do you notice what a peculiar gleam there is in the air, and how the flies bite?"

"Yes—yes, I see all that, father."

"Well, it's rain coming, my boy. There's going to be a thunderstorm up in the hills before many hours are past. I'm not a clever man, but I can tell what the weather's going to be as well as most folk."

"I'm glad of it, father, if it will please you."

"Please me, boy? I shall be delighted. To-morrow morning the salmon will be running up the river again, and we may hoist the signal for help. I say, you don't think Jack Lawrence has gone yet?"

"No, father," said Nic; "I do not."

"Why, Nic?—why?" cried the old sailor.

"Because he said to me he should certainly come up and see us again before he went."

"To be sure; so he did to me, Nic. I say, my boy, I—that is—er—wasn't I a little bit crusty this morning to you and poor old William Solly?"

"Well, yes; just a little, father," said Nic, taking his arm.

"Sorry for it. Change of the weather, Nic, affects me. It was coming on. I must apologise to Solly. Grand old fellow, William Solly. Saved my life over and over again. Man who would die for his master, Nic; and a man who would do that is more than a servant, Nic—he is a friend."

Chapter Eight.

The Captain's Prophecy.

Before many hours had passed the Captain's words proved correct. The clouds gathered over the tops, and there was a tremendous storm a thousand feet above the Point. The lightning flashed and struck and splintered the rugged old masses of granite; the thunder roared, and there was a perfect deluge of rain; while down near the sea, though it was intensely hot, not a drop fell, and the evening came on soft and cool.

"Solly, my lad," cried the Captain, rubbing his hands, "we shall have the fall roaring before midnight; but don't sit up to listen to it."

"Cert'n'y not, sir," said the old sailor.

"Your watch will begin at daybreak, when you will hoist the signal for Captain Lawrence."

"Ay, ay, sir!"

"And keep eye to west'ard on and off all day, to try if you can sight the frigate."

"Ay, ay, sir!"

"And in the course of the morning you will go quietly round and tell the men to rendezvous here about eight, when you will serve out the arms."

"Ay, ay, sir."

"The good stout oak cudgels I had cut; and if we're lucky, my lad, we shall have as nice and pleasant a fight as ever we two had in our lives."

"Quite a treat, sir," said the old sailor; "and I hope we shall be able to pay our debts."

The Captain was in the highest of glee all the evening, and he shook his son's hand very warmly when they parted for bed.

About one o'clock Nic was aroused from a deep sleep by a sharp knocking at his door.

"Awake, Nic?" came in the familiar accents.

"No, father. Yes, father. Is anything wrong?"

"Wrong? No, my boy; right! Hear the fall?"

"No, father; I was sound asleep."

"Open your window and put out your head, boy. The water's coming down and roaring like thunder. Good-night."

Nic slipped out of bed, did as he was told, and, as he listened, there was the deep, musical, booming sound of the fall seeming to fill the air, while from one part of the ravine a low, rushing noise told that the river must be pretty full.

Nic stood listening for some time before closing his window and returning to bed, to lie wakeful and depressed, feeling a strange kind of foreboding, as if some serious trouble was at hand. It was not that he was afraid or shrank from the contest which might in all probability take place the next night, though he knew that it would be desperate—for, on the contrary, he felt excited and quite ready to join in the fray; but he was worried about his father, and the difficulty he knew he would have in keeping him out of danger. He was in this awkward position, too: what he would like to do would be to get Solly and a couple of their stoutest men to act as bodyguard to protect his father; but, if he attempted such a thing, the chances were that the Captain would look upon it as cowardice, and order them off to the thick of the cudgel-play.

Just as he reached this point he fell asleep.

Nic found the Captain down first next morning, looking as pleased as a boy about to start for his holidays.

"You're a pretty fellow," he cried. "Why, I've been up hours, and went right to the falls. Pool's full, Nic, my boy, the salmon are up, and it's splendid, lad."

"What is, father?"

"Something else is coming up."

"What?"

"Those scoundrels are on the *qui vive*. I was resting on one of the rough stone seats, when, as I sat hidden among the trees, I caught sight of something on the far side of the pool—a man creeping cautiously down to spy out the state of the water."

"Pete Burge, father?" cried Nic eagerly.

"Humph! No; I hardly caught a glimpse of his face, but it was too short for that scoundrel. I think it was that thick-set, humpbacked rascal they call Dee."

"And did he see you, father?"

"No: I sat still, my boy, and watched till he slunk away again. Nic, lad, we shall have them here to-night, and we must be ready."

"Yes, father, if Captain Lawrence sends his men."

"Whether he does or no, sir. I can't sit still and know that my salmon are being stolen. Come—breakfast! Oh, here's Solly.—Here, you, sir, what about those two signal flags? Hoist them directly."

"Run 'em up, sir, as soon as it was light."

"Good. Then, now, keep a lookout for the frigate." The day wore away with no news of the ship being in the offing, and the Captain began to fume and fret, so that Nic made an excuse to get away and look out, relieving Solly, stationing himself by the flagstaff and scanning the horizon till his eyes grew weary and his head ached.

It was about six o'clock when he was summoned to dinner by Solly, who took his place, and Nic went and joined his father.

"Needn't speak," said the old man bitterly; "I know; Lawrence hasn't come. We'll have to do it ourselves."

Nic was silent, and during the meal his father hardly spoke a word.

Just as they were about to rise, Solly entered the room, and the Captain turned to him eagerly.

"I was going to send for you, my lad," he said. "Captain Lawrence must be away, and we shall have to trap the scoundrels ourselves. How many men can we muster?"

"Ten, sir."

"Not half enough," said the Captain; "but they are strong, staunch fellows, and we have right on our side. Ten against twenty or thirty. Long odds; but we've gone against heavier odds than that in our time, Solly."

"Ay, sir, that we have."

"We must lie in wait and take them by surprise when they're scattered, my lads. But what luck! what luck! Now if Lawrence had only kept faith with me we could have trapped the whole gang."

"Well, your honour, why not?" said Solly sharply.

"Why not?"

"He'll be here before we want him."

"What?" cried Nic. "Is the frigate in sight?"

"In sight, sir—and was when you left the signal station."

"No," said Nic sharply; "the only vessel in sight then was a big merchantman with her yards all awry."

"That's so, sir, and she gammoned me. The skipper's had her streak painted out, and a lot of her tackle cast loose, to make her look like a lubberly trader; but it's the frigate, as I made out at last, coming down with a spanking breeze, and in an hour's time she'll be close enough to send her men ashore."

The Captain sprang up and caught his son's hand, to ring it hard.

"Huzza, Nic!" he cried excitedly. "This is going to be a night of nights."

It was.

Chapter Nine.

Ready for Action.

"That's about their size, Master Nic," said Solly, as he stood in the coach-house balancing a heavy cudgel in his hand—one of a couple of dozen lying on the top of the corn-bin just through the stable door.

"Oh, the size doesn't matter, Bill," said Nic impatiently.

"Begging your pardon, sir, it do," said the old sailor severely. "You don't want to kill nobody in a fight such as we're going to have, do ye?"

"No, no; of course not."

"There you are, then. Man's sure to hit as hard as he can when his monkey's up; and that stick's just as heavy as you can have 'em without breaking bones. That's the sort o' stick as'll knock a man silly and give him the headache for a week, and sarve him right. If it was half-a-hounce heavier it'd kill him."

"How do you know?" said Nic sharply.

"How do I know, sir?" said the man wonderingly. "Why, I weighed it."

Nic would have asked for further explanations; but just then there were steps heard in the yard, and the gardener and a couple of labourers came up in the dusk.

"Oh, there you are," growled Solly. "Here's your weepuns;" and he raised three of the cudgels. "You may hit as hard as you like with them. Seen any of the others?"

"Yes," said the gardener; "there's two from the village coming along the road, and three of us taking the short cut over the home field. That's all I see."

"Humph!" said Solly. "There ought to be five more by this time."

"Sick on it, p'r'aps," grumbled the gardener; "and no wonder. We are."

"What! Are you afraid?" cried Nic.

"No, sir, I aren't afraid; on'y sick on it. I like a good fight, and so do these here when it's 'bout fair and ekal, but every time we has a go in t'other side seems to be the flails and we only the corn and straw. They're too many for us. I'm sick o' being thrashed, and so's these here; and that aren't being afraid."

"Why, you aren't going to sneak out of it, are you?" growled Solly.

"No, I aren't," said the gardener; "not till I've had a good go at that Pete Burge and Master Humpy Dee. But I'm going to sarcumwent 'em this time."

"Here are the others coming, Bill," cried Nic.—"What are you going to do this time?" he said to the gardener.

"Sarcumwent 'em, Master Nic," said the man, with a grin. "It's no use to hit at their heads and arms or to poke 'em in the carcass—they don't mind that; so we've been thinking of it out, and we three's going to hit 'em low down."

"That's good," said Solly; "same as we used to sarve the black men out in Jay-may-kee. They've all got heads as hard as skittle-balls, but their shins are as tender as a dog's foot."

Just then five more men came up and received their cudgels; and directly after three more came slouching up; and soon after another couple, and received their arms.

"Is this all on us?" said one of the fresh-comers, as the sturdy fellows stood together.

"Ay, is this all, Master Nic?" cried another.

"Why?" he said sharply.

"Because there aren't enough, sir," said the first man. "I got to hear on it down the village."

"Ah! you heard news?" cried Nic.

"Ay, sir, if you call such ugly stuff as that news. There's been a bit of a row among 'em, all along o' Pete Burge."

"Quarrelling among themselves?"

"That's right, sir; 'cause Pete Burge said he wouldn't have no more to do with it; and they've been at him—some on 'em from over yonder at the town. I hear say as there was a fight, and then Pete kep' on saying he would jyne 'em; and then there was another fight, and Pete Burge licked the second man, and then he says he wouldn't go. And then there was another fight, and Pete Burge licked Humpy Dee, and Humpy says Pete was a coward, and Pete knocked him flat on the back. 'I'll show you whether I'm a coward,' he says. 'I didn't mean to have no more to do wi' Squire Revel's zammon,' he says; 'but I will go to-night, for the last time, just to show you as I aren't a cowards,' he says, 'and then I'm done.'"

"Ay; and he zays," cried another man from the village, "'If any one thinks I'm a coward, then let him come and tell me.'"

"Then they are coming to-night?" cried Nic, who somehow felt a kind of satisfaction in his adversary's prowess.

"Oh, ay," said the other man who had grumbled; "they're a-coming to-night. There's a big gang coming from the town, and I hear they're going to bring a cart for the zammon. There'll be a good thirty on 'em, Master Nic, zir; and I zay we aren't enough."

"No," said Nic quietly; "we are not enough, but we are going to have our revenge to-night for all the knocking about we've had."

"But we're not enough, Master Nic. We're ready to fight, all on us—eh, mates?"

"Ay!" came in a deep growl.

"But there aren't enough on us."

"There will be," said Nic in an eager whisper, "for a strong party of Jack-tars from the king's ship that was lying off this evening are by this time marching up to help us, and we're going to give these scoundrels such a thrashing as will sicken them from ever meddling again with my father's fish."

"Yah!" growled a voice out of the gloom.

"Who said that?" cried Nic.

"I did, Master Nic," said the gardener sharply; "and you can tell the Captain if you like. I say it aren't fair to try and humbug a lot o' men as is ready to fight for you. It's like saying 'rats' to a dog when there aren't none."

"Is it?" cried Nic, laughing. "How can that be? You heard just now that there will be about thirty rats for our bulldogs to worry."

"I meant t'other way on, sir," growled the man sulkily. "No sailor bulldogs to come and help us."

"How dare you say that?" cried Nic angrily.

"'Cause I've lived off and on about Plymouth all my life and close to the sea, and if I don't know a king's ship by this time I ought to. That's only a lubberly old merchantman. Why, her

yards were all anyhow, with not half men enough to keep 'em square."

"Bah!" cried Solly angrily. "Hold your mouth, you one-eyed old tater-grubber. What do you mean by giving the young master the lie?"

"That will do, Solly," cried Nic. "He means right. Look here, my lads; that is a king's ship, the one commanded by my father's friend; and he has made her look all rough like that so as to cheat the salmon-gang, and it will have cheated them if it has cheated you."

A cheer was bursting forth, but Nic checked it, and the gardener said huskily:

"Master Nic, I beg your pardon. I oughtn't to ha' said such a word. It was the king's ship as humbugged me, and not you. Say, lads, we're going to have a night of it, eh?"

A low buzz of satisfaction arose; and Nic hurried out, to walk in the direction of the signal-staff, where the Captain had gone to look out for their allies.

"Who goes there?" came in the old officer's deep voice.

"Only I, father."

"Bah!" cried the Captain in a low, angry voice. "Give the word, sir—'Tails.'"

"The word?—'Tails!'" said Nic, wonderingly.

"Of course. I told you we must have a password, to tell friends from foes."

"Not a word, father."

"What, sir? Humph, no! I remember—I meant to give it to all at once. The word is 'Tails' and the countersign is 'Heads,' and any one who cannot give it is to have heads. Do you see?"

"Oh yes, father, I see; but are the sailors coming?"

"Can't hear anything of them, my boy, and it's too dark to see; but they must be here soon."

"I hope they will be, father," said Nic.

"Don't say you hope they will be, as if you felt that they weren't coming. They're sure to come, my boy. Jack Lawrence never broke faith. Now, look here; those scoundrels will be here by ten o'clock, some of them, for certain, and we must have our men in ambush first—our men, Nic. Jack Lawrence's lads I shall place so as to cut off the enemy's retreat, ready to close in upon them and take them in the rear. Do you see?"

"Yes, father; excellent."

"Then I propose that as soon as we hear our reinforcement coming you go off and plant your men in the wood behind the fall. I shall lead the sailors right round you to the other side of the pool; place them; and then there must be perfect silence till the enemy has lit up his torches and got well to work. Then I shall give a shrill whistle on the French bo'sun's pipe I have in my pocket, you will advance your men and fall to, and we shall come upon them from the other side."

"I see, father."

"But look here, Nic—did you change your things?"

"Yes, father; got on the old fishing and wading suit."

"That's right, boy, for you've got your work cut out, and it may mean water as well as land."

"Yes, I expect to be in a pretty pickle," said Nic, laughing, and beginning to feel excited now. "But do you think the sailors will find their way here in the dark?"

"Of course," cried the Captain sharply. "Jack Lawrence will head them."

"Hist!" whispered Nic, placing his hand to his ear and gazing seaward.

"Hear 'em?"

Nic was silent for a few moments.

"Yes," he said. "I can hear their soft, easy tramp over the short grass. Listen."

"Right," said the Captain, as from below them there came out of the darkness the regular *thrup, thrup* of a body of men marching together. Then, loudly, "king's men?"

"Captain Revel?" came back in reply.

"Right. Captain Lawrence there?"

"No, sir; he had a sudden summons from the port admiral, and is at Plymouth. He gave me my instructions, sir—Lieutenant Kershaw. I have thirty men here."

"Bravo, my lad!" cried the Captain. "Forward, and follow me to the house. Your men will take a bit of refreshment before we get to work."

"Forward," said the lieutenant in a low voice, and the *thrup*, *thrup* of the footsteps began again, not a man being visible in the gloom.

"Off with you, Nic," whispered the Captain. "Get your men in hiding at once. This is going to be a grand night, my boy. Good luck to you; and I say, Nic, my boy—"

"Yes, father."

"No prisoners, but tell the men to hit hard." Nic went off at a run, and the lieutenant directly after joined the Captain, his men close at hand following behind.

Chapter Ten.

A Night of Nights.

Nic's heart beat fast as he ran lightly along the path, reached the house, and ran round to the stable-yard, where Solly and the men were waiting.

"Ready, my lads?" he said in a low, husky voice, full of the excitement he felt.

"We'll go on round to the back of the pool at once. The sailors are here, thirty strong, with their officer; so we ought to give the enemy a severe lesson.—Ah! Don't cheer. Ready?—Forward. Come, Solly; we'll lead."

"Precious dark, Master Nic," growled the old sailor in a hoarse whisper. "We shan't hardly be able to tell t'other from which."

"Ah! I forgot," cried Nic excitedly. "Halt! Look here, my men. Our password is 'Tails,' and our friends have to answer 'Heads.' So, if you are in doubt, cry 'Tails,' and if your adversary does not answer 'Heads' he's an enemy."

"Why, a-mussy me, Master Nic?" growled Solly, "we shan't make heads or tails o' that in a scrimble-scramble scrimmage such as we're going to be in. What's the skipper thinking about? Let me tell 'em what to do."

"You heard your master's order, Solly," replied Nic.

"Yes, sir, of course; but this here won't do no harm. Look here, my lads; as soon as ever we're at it, hit hard at every one who aren't a Jack. You'll know them."

Nic felt that this addition could do no harm, so he did not interfere, but led on right past the way down to the falls, which had shrunk now to a little cascade falling with a pleasant murmur, for the draining of the heavy thunder-showers was nearly at an end, and the pool lay calm enough in the black darkness beneath the overhanging rocks and spreading trees—just in the right condition for a raid, and in all probability full of salmon.

All at once the old sailor indulged in a burst of chuckles.

"Hear something, Bill?" said Nic.

"No, my lad, not yet; I was on'y thinking. They was going to bring a cart up the road yonder, weren't they?"

"Yes; one of the men said so," replied Nic.

"Well, we're a-going to give 'em something to take back in that cart to-night, my lad," whispered the man, with another chuckle; "and it won't be fish, nor it won't be fowl. My fingers is a-tingling so that I thought something was the matter, and I tried to change my stick from my right hand into my left."

"Well, what of that?" said Nic contemptuously; "it was only pins and needles."

"Nay, Master Nic, it weren't that. I've been a sailor in the king's ships and have had it before. It was the fighting-stuff running down to the very tips of my fingers, and they wouldn't let go."

"Hush! don't talk now," whispered Nic; "there may be one or two of the enemy yonder."

"Nay, it's a bit too soon for 'em, sir; but it'll be as well to keep quiet."

The narrow paths of the tangled wilderness at the back of the pool were so well known to all present that their young leader had no difficulty in getting them stationed by twos and threes well down the sides of the gorge on shelves and ledges where the bushes and ferns grew thickly, from whence, when the poachers were well at work, it would be easy to spring down into the water and make the attack. For the flood had so far subsided now that the worst hole was not above five feet deep, and the greater part about three, with a fairly even bottom of ground-down rock smoothed by the pebbles washed over it in flood-time.

Here it was that the salmon for the most part congregated, the new-comers from the sea taking naturally to the haunts of their forerunners from time immemorial, so that poacher or honest fisher pretty well knew where he would be most successful.

Nic chose a central spot for himself and Solly, some four feet above the level of the black water, and after ranging his men to right and left he sat down to wait, with all silent and dark around, save for the murmur of the water and the gleaming of a star or two overhead, for besides this there was not a glint of light. Still, the place seemed to stand out before him. Exactly opposite, across the pool, was the narrow opening between the steep rocks on either side; and he knew without telling that as soon as the poachers began their work his father would send some of his active allies into the bed of the stream lower down, to advance upward, probably before the whistle was blown.

"And then the scoundrels will be in a regular trap before they know it," thought Nic, as he strained his ears to catch the sound of the sailors being stationed in their hiding-places; but all was still save the soft humming roar of the falling water plunging into the pool.

An hour passed very slowly, and Nic's cramped position began to affect him with the tingling sensation known as pins and needles; this he did not attribute to the movement of his nerve-currents eager to reach his toes and fill him with a desire to kick his enemies, but quietly changed his position and waited, trembling with excitement, and longing now to get the matter

over, fully satisfied as he was that his friends were all in position and ready for the fray.

At last!

There was a sharp crack, as if someone had trodden upon a piece of dead-wood away up to the right. Then another crack and a rustling, and an evident disregard of caution.

"Come along, my lads," said a low, harsh voice; and then there was a splash, as if a man had lowered himself into the water. "They had enough of it last time, and won't come this, I'll wager. If they do, we're half as many again, and we'll give 'em such a drubbing as'll stop 'em for long enough."

"Needn't shout and holloa," said another voice from the side. "Keep quiet. We don't want to fight unless we're obliged."

"Oh no, of course not!" said the man with the harsh voice mockingly. "If we do have to, my lads, two of you had better take Pete Burge home to his mother."

There was a low laugh at this, and Pete remained silent as far as making any retort was concerned, but directly after Nic felt a singular thrill run through him as the man said softly:

"Three of you get there to the mouth and drop the net across and hold it, for the fish will make a rush that way. Don't be afraid of the water. Shove the bottom line well round the stones, and keep your feet on it. A lot got away last time."

There was the sound of the water washing as men waded along the side of the great circular pool, and then the whishing of a net being dropped down and arranged.

"Ha, ha!" laughed a man; "there's one of 'em. Come back again' my legs. He's in the net now. Can't get through."

"Now then," cried the harsh-voiced fellow; "open those lanterns and get your links alight, so as we can see what we're about."

"Not zo much noise, Humpy Dee," said Pete sharply, as the light of three lanterns which had been carried beneath sacks gleamed out over the water, and the light rapidly increased as dark figures could be seen lighting torches from the feeble candles and then waving their sticks of oakum and pitch to

make them blaze, so that others could also start the links they carried.

At first the light was feeble, and a good deal of black smoke arose, but soon after over a dozen torches were burning brightly, showing quite a little crowd of men, standing in the black water, armed with hooks and fish-spears, and each with a stout staff stuck in his belt.

The scene was weird and strange, the light reflected from the cliff-like sides of the pool seeming to be condensed upon the surface; and the faces of the marauders gleamed strangely above the flashing water, beginning to be agitated now by the startled salmon; while rising upward there was a gathering cloud of black, stifling smoke.

"Ready there with that net," cried Humpy Dee, a broad-shouldered, dwarfed man, whose head was deep down between his shoulders.

"Ay, ay!" came from the mouth of the pool.

"Less noise," cried Pete angrily. "Here, you, Jack Willick, and you, Nat Barrow, go up towards the house and give us word if anyone's coming, so as we may be ready."

"To run?" snarled Humpy Dee. "Stop where you are, lads. If the old squire meant to come with his gang he'd ha' been here afore now, and—"

Phee-yew!

The Captain's shrill silver whistle rang out loudly at this instant, and Nic and his men grasped their cudgels more tightly.

"Now for it, lads," he shouted, and he sprang from his ledge into the water and made at Humpy Dee.

Chapter Eleven.

A Black Night.

Nic's cry was answered by a loud cheer from his men, which seemed to paralyse the enemy—some thirty strong, who stood staring, the torch-bearers holding their smoky lights on high—

giving the party from the Point plenty of opportunity for picking their men, as they followed their leader's example and leaped into the pool. This caused a rush of the fish towards the lights for the most part, though many made for the gap to follow the stream, shooting against the net, which was held tightly in its place.

"There, go home, you set of ugly fools, before you're hurt," cried the deformed man, with a snarl like that of a wild beast. "What! You will have it? Come on, then. Hi, there! hold the links higher, and let us see their thick heads. Give it to 'em hard."

Emboldened by old successes, two wings of the gang whipped out their sticks and took a step or two forward, to stand firm on either side of the deformed man, who was a step in front. The next minute the fray had commenced, Nic leading off with a tremendous cut from his left at Humpy Dee's head.

For the young man's blood was up; he was the captain of the little party, and he knew that everything depended upon him. If he fought well they would stand by him to a man, as they had shown before. If, on the other hand, he seemed timid and careful, they would show a disposition to act on the defensive. That would not do now, as Nic well knew. His object was to make a brave charge and stagger the enemy, so that they might become the easier victims to panic when they found that they were attacked by a strong party in the rear.

Crack! went Nic's stout stick, as he struck with all his might; and *crick, crick, crack, crash!* went a score or more, mingled with shouts of defiance.

But Nic's cudgel did not give forth its sharp sound from contact with the leader's head, for he had to do with a clever cudgel-player as well as one who had often proved his power as a tricky wrestler in contests with the best men of the neighbouring farthest west county. Nic's blow was cleverly caught on as stout a cudgel, and the next moment his left arm fell numb to his side.

He struck savagely now, making up for want of skill by the rain of blows he dealt at his adversary, and thus saved himself from being beaten down into the water at once.

But it was all in vain.

On the other hand, though his men did better, being more equally matched they did not cause the panic Nic had hoped for,

and the enemy kept their ground; while the torches spluttered, blazed, and smoked, and to the spectators the amphitheatre during those few brief moments looked wild and strange as some feverish dream.

But, as before said, Nic's brave efforts were all in vain. His muscles were too soft and green, and he was, in addition to being young, no adept in the handling of a stick. He fought bravely, but he had not the strength to keep it up against this short, iron-muscled, skilful foe. He was aware of it only too soon, for his guard was beaten down, and he saw stars and flashes of light as he received a sharp blow from his adversary's stick. Then he felt himself caught by the throat, and by the light of one of the torches he saw the man's cudgel in the act of falling once more for a blow which he could only weakly parry, when another cudgel flashed by, there was a crack just over his head, and Humpy Dee uttered a yell of rage.

"You coward!" he roared. "Take that!" and quick as a flash Nic made out that he struck at some one else, and attributed the side-blow in his defence to Solly, who was, he believed, close by.

At that moment a loud, imperious voice from somewhere in front and above shouted, so that the rocks echoed:

"Hold hard below there!"

Nic involuntarily lowered his cudgel and stood panting, giddy, and sick, listening.

"Yah! never mind him," roared Humpy. "You, Pete, I'll pay you afterwards."

"Now, boys, down with you."

"The poachers' companions," cried one of Nic's men, and they stepped forward to the attack again, when a pistol-shot rang out and was multiplied by the rocky sides of the arena, making the combatants pause, so that the voice from above was plainly heard:

"Below there, you scoundrels! Surrender in the king's name. You are surrounded."

"Brag, my lads!" roared Humpy Dee. "Stand to it, boys, and haul the beggars out."

There was a moment's pause, just enough for the next words to be heard:

"At 'em, lads! You've got 'em, every man."

A roaring cheer followed, and Nic saw the torches through the cloud that seemed to be thickening around them. He could hear shouts, which grew louder and fiercer. There was the rattle of cudgels, savage yells seemed to be bellowed in his ears, and he felt himself thrust and struck and hauled here and there as a desperate fight went on for his possession. Then, close at hand, there was a deafening cheer, a tremendous shock, the rattle of blows, and he was down upon his knees. Lastly, in a faint, dreamy way, he was conscious of the rush of cold water about his face, in his ears the thundering noise of total immersion, with the hot, strangling sense of drowning; and then all was blank darkness, and he knew no more.

Chapter Twelve.

A Strange Awakening.

Another storm seemed to have gathered in Dartmoor—a terrible storm, which sent the rain down in sheets, which creaked and groaned as they washed to and fro, and every now and then struck against the rocks with a noise like thunder. Great stones seemed to be torn up and thrown here and there, making the shepherds shout as they tried to keep their flocks together under the shelter of some granite for, while down by the falls at the salmon-pool the water came over as it had never come before.

Nic had a faint recollection of his fight with Humpy Dee, and of some one coming to take his part, with the result that they were all tangled up together till they were forced beneath the water. This must have separated them, so that he was quite alone now, being carried round and round the pool, rising and falling in a regular way, till he came beneath the falls, when down came the tons of water upon his head, driving him beneath the surface, to glide on in the darkness, feeling sick and half-suffocated, while his head burned and throbbed as if it would burst.

It did not seem to matter much, but it appeared very strange; and this must be drowning, but it took such a long time, and

went on and on, repeating itself in the same way as if it would never end.

That part of it was very strange, too—that light; and it puzzled Nic exceedingly, for it seemed to be impossible that he should be going round and round in the salmon-pool, to be sucked under the falls, and feel the water come thundering upon his head with a crash and creak and groan, and in the midst of it for a lantern to come slowly along till it was quite close to him, and voices to be heard.

After seeing it again and again, he felt that he understood what it was. He had been drowned, and they were coming with a lantern to look for his body; but they never found it, though they came and stood talking about him over and over again.

At last he heard what was said quite plainly, but he only knew one voice out of the three that spoke, and he could not make out whose that was.

The voice said, "Better, sir, to-day;" and another voice said, "Oh yes, you're getting all right now: head's healing nicely. The sooner you get up on deck and find your sea-legs the better."

"Oh, I shall be all right there, sir."

"Been to sea before?"

"In fishing craft, sir—often. But would you mind telling me, sir, where we're going?"

"Oh, you'll know soon enough, my lad. Well: America and the West Indies."

"This must be a dream," thought Nic; and he was lying wondering, when the light was suddenly held close to him, and he could see over his head beams and planks and iron rings and ropes, which made it all more puzzling than ever.

Then a cool hand touched his brow, and it seemed as if a bandage was removed, cool water laved the part which ached and burned, and a fresh bandage was fastened on.

"Won't die, will he, sir?" said the voice Nic knew but could not quite make out.

"Oh no, not now, my lad. He has had a near shave, and been none the better for knocking about in this storm; but he's young

and healthy, and the fever is not quite so high this morning.—Hold the light nearer, Jeffs.—Hallo! Look at his eyes; he can hear what we say.—Coming round, then, my lad?”

“Yes,” said Nic feebly, “round and round. The falls will not come on my head any more, will they?”

Crash—rush! and Nic groaned, for down came the water again, and the young man nearly swooned in his agony, while a deathly sensation of giddiness attacked him.

“Head seems to be all right now,” said the third voice.

“Yes, healing nicely; but he ought to have been sent ashore to the hospital.”

“Oh, I don’t know. Bit of practice.”

The roar and rush ceased, and the terrible sinking sensation passed off a little.

“Drink this, my lad,” said a voice, and Nic felt himself raised; something nasty was trickled between his lips, and he was lowered down again, and it was dark, while the burning pain, the giddiness, and the going round the pool and under the falls went on over and over in a dreamy, distant way once more. Then there was a long, drowsy space, and the sound of the falls grew subdued.

At last Nic lay puzzling his weary, confused head as to the meaning of a strange creaking, and a peculiar rising and falling, and why it was that he did not feel wet.

Just then from out of the darkness there was a low whistling sound, which he recognised as part of a tune he had often heard, and it was so pleasant to hear that he lay quite still listening till it ended, when he fell asleep, and seemed to wake again directly, with the melody of the old country ditty being repeated softly close at hand.

“Who’s that?” he said at last; and there was a start, and a voice—that voice he could not make out—cried:

“Hullo, Master Nic! glad to hear you speak zensible again.”

“Speak—sensible—why shouldn’t I?”

"I d'know, zir. But you have been going it a rum 'un. Feel better?"

"Feel—better. I don't know. Who is it?"

"Me, sir."

"Yes, yes," cried Nic querulously; "but who is it?"

"Pete Burge, sir."

"Pete—Burge," said Nic thoughtfully, and he lay very still trying to think; but he could not manage it, for the water in the pool seemed to be bearing him along, and now he was gliding up, and then down again, while his companion kept on talk, talk, talk, in a low murmur, and all was blank once more.

Then a change came, and Nic lay thinking a little more clearly.

"Are you there, Pete Burge?" he said.

"Yes, I'm here, master."

"What was that you were saying to me just now?"

"Just now?" said the man wonderingly. "Well, you do go on queer, zir. That was the day afore yes'day. But I zay, you are better now, aren't you?"

"Better? I don't know. I thought I was drowned."

"Poor lad!" said Pete softly; but it seemed to sting Nic.

"What do you mean by that?" he said feebly.

"Zorry for you, master."

"Why?"

"'Cause you've been zo bad."

"Been so bad?" said Nic thoughtfully. "Why have I been so bad? It's very strange."

Pete Burge made no reply, and there was silence again, till it was broken by Nic, who said suddenly:

"Have you been very bad too?"

"Me, zir? Yes, horrid. Thought I was going to the locker, as they call it. Doctor zaid I ought to have been took to the hospital."

"Were you nearly drowned?" said Nic after a pause, during which he had to fight hard to keep his thinking power under control.

"Was I nearly drowned, zir?" said the man, with a low chuckle. "Zeems to me I was nearly everythinged. Head smashed, chopped, choked, and drowned too."

Nic was silent again, for he could not take in so many ideas as this at once, and it was some minutes before he could collect himself for another question.

"But you are better now?"

"Oh yes, zir, I'm better now. Doctor zays I'm to get up tomorrow."

"The doctor! Was that the doctor whom I heard talking yesterday?"

"Yes: two of 'em; they've pulled uz round wonderful. You frightened me horrid, master, the way you went on, and just when I was most bad. You made me feel it was all my fault, and I couldn't zleep for thinking that if you died I'd killed you. But I zay, master, you won't die now, will you?"

"How absurd!" said Nic, with a weak laugh. "Of course not. Why should I die now?"

"Ah, why indeed, when you're getting better?"

There was another silence before Nic began again.

"I've been wondering," he said, "why it is that we can be going round the salmon-pool like this, and yet be lying here talking about the doctor and being bad."

"Ay, 'tis rum, sir."

"Yes, it puzzles me. Look here; didn't we have a fight with you and your men to-night?"

"We had a big fight, sir; but it waren't to-night."

"But it's quite dark still, and I suppose it's my head being giddy that makes me feel that we're going up and down."

"Oh no, it aren't, zir," said the man, laughing; "we're going up and down bad enough. Not zo bad as we have been."

"And round and round?"

"No; not going round, master."

"But where are we?" said Nic eagerly.

"Ah, that puzzles you, do it, zir? Well, it puzzled me at first, till I asked; and then the doctor zaid we was in the cockpit, but I haven't heard any battle-cocks crowing, and you can't zee now, it's zo dark. Black enough, though, for a pit."

"Cockpit—cockpit!" said Nic. "Why, that's on board ship."

"To be zure."

"But we are not on board ship?"

"Aren't we?" said the man.

"I—I don't understand," cried Nic after a pause. "My head is all confused and strange. Tell me what it all means."

Pete Burge was silent.

"Poor lad!" he said to himself; "how's he going to take it when he knows all?"

"You do not speak," said Nic excitedly. "Ah! I am beginning to think clearly now. You came with the men after the salmon?"

"Ay, worse luck. I didn't want to, but I had to go."

"Come," said Nic sharply. "To-night, wasn't it?"

"Nay. It's 'bout three weeks ago, master."

This announcement, though almost a repetition, seemed to stun Nic for the time; but he began again:

"We had a desperate fight, didn't we?"

"Worst I was ever in."

"And—yes, I remember; we were struggling in the pool when the sailors came."

"That's it, master; you've got it now."

"But your side won, then, and I'm a prisoner?"

"Nay; your side won, master."

"How can that be?" cried Nic.

"'Cause it is. They was too many for uz. They come down like thunder on uz, and 'fore we knowed where we was we was tied up in twos and being marched away."

"Our side won?" said Nic, in his confusion.

"That's right, master. You zee, they told Humpy Dee and the rest to give in, and they wouldn't; so the zailor officer wouldn't stand no nonsense. His men begun with sticks; but, as our zide made a big fight of it, they whips out their cutlashes and used them. I got one chop, and you nearly had it, and when two or three more had had a taste of the sharp edge they begun to give in; and, as I telled you, next thing we was tied two and two and marched down to the river, pitched into the bottoms of two boats, and rowed aboard a ship as zet zail at once; and next night we was pitched down into the boats again and hoisted aboard this ship, as was lying off Plymouth waiting to start."

"Waiting to sail?"

"That's right, master! And I s'pose she went off at once, but I was too bad to know anything about it. When I could begin to understand I was lying here in this hammock, and the doctor telled me."

"One moment. Where are the others?"

"All aboard, sir—that is, twenty-two with uz."

"Some of our men too?"

"Nay, zir; on'y our gang."

"But I don't understand, quite," said Nic pitifully. "I want to know why they have brought me. Tell me, Pete Burge—my head is getting confused again—tell me why I am here."

"Mistake, I s'pose, sir. Thought, zeeing you all rough-looking and covered with blood, as you was one of us."

Nic lay with his head turned in the speaker's direction, battling with the horrible despairing thoughts which came like a flood over his disordered brain; but they were too much for him. He tried to speak; but the dark waters of the pool were there again, and the next minute he felt as if he had been drawn by the current beneath the fall, and all was mental darkness and the old confusion once more.

Chapter Thirteen.

William Solly has Thoughts.

It would have been better, perhaps, for Nic Revel if he had not heard the result of the plan to get help from Captain Lawrence's ship and its disastrous results for him.

For Pete Burge's narrative was correct enough, save that he made an omission or two, notably the fact that he was captured while making a brave effort to save Nic from the savage blows being dealt out to him by Humpy Dee, who was trying to visit upon his head the disappointment he felt through the failure of the raid.

It was from finding Nic, helplessly insensible, being carried off by Pete that in the dark the sailors took the young man for one of the party they were to attack; and hence it was that he was tied fast to his injured companion, carried down the hill-slope to the river, bundled into the boat with the other prisoners, and carried off, there being no further communication held with the shore. Captain Lawrence knew nothing till long afterwards about Nic being missing, and the long, long search made for him in the pool; two of the men, when questioned later on during the inquiry, having seen him go down in the fierce struggle. But no one, during the confusion which ensued, had seen him rise again; for it was somewhere about that time that those who bore torches, and saw that the fight was going against them, dashed them down into the water, hoping the darkness would cover their escape.

The Captain, in the triumphant issue of the encounter, had stood to see the prisoners all bound, and soon after, upon not finding his son, accepted Solly's suggestion that Nic had walked

down to see the prisoners off, and perhaps gone on board to thank the officer for his help.

The next morning the ship was gone, and a horrible dread assailed master and man as to Nic's fate. Then came the information from the two labourers who had taken part in the defence and the search, every inch of the pool and river being examined, till the suspicion became a certainty that Nic had been swept down the river and carried out to sea, the cap he wore having been brought in by one of the fishermen who harboured his boat in the mouth of the stream.

But Captain Revel did not rest content with this: in his agony he communicated with Captain Lawrence, who came on at once, and confessed now to his old friend why, when his help was asked, he had jumped at the idea. They wanted men for one of the ships bound for Charleston and the West Indies, the pressgangs having been very unsuccessful; and as the salmon-poachers were described to him as being strong, active fellows, the idea struck him that here was a fine opportunity for ridding the neighbourhood of a gang of mischievous ne'er-do-weels—men who would be of service to their country, and henceforth leave his old brother-officer in peace; while any of them not particularly suitable could be easily got rid of among the sugar and tobacco plantations.

"Then," said Captain Revel, "you have sent them away?"

"Yes; they sailed the next night. It was rather a high-handed transaction; but the service wanted them badly, and we can't afford to be too particular at a time like this."

"But do you think it likely that my poor boy was among the prisoners?"

"Impossible," said the Captain. "If he were—which is not in the least likely—all he had to do was to speak and say who he was. But absurd! I should have known, of course."

"But after he was on board the other vessel?"

"My dear old friend," said Captain Lawrence sympathetically, "I shrink from dashing your hopes, but I feel how unjust it would be to back you up in the idea that he may have gone with the impressed men. He is a gentleman, and an English officer's son, and he would only have to open his lips to any one he encountered, and explain his position, to be sent home from the first port he reached."

"Yes, yes, of course," said the Captain bitterly; "and I shall never see my poor boy again."

Captain Lawrence was so uneasy about his friend that he went back to the boat and sent her off to the ship, returning afterwards to the house, bitterly regretting that he had sent his men ashore and allowed himself to be tempted into making a seizure of the poachers.

Captain Revel was seated in his arm-chair when Captain Lawrence re-entered the house, looking calm, grave, and thoughtful. His friend's coming made him raise his head and gaze sorrowfully; then, with a weary smile, he let his chin drop upon his breast and sat looking hard at the carpet.

"Come, Revel, man," cried Captain Lawrence, "you must cheer up. We sailors can't afford to look at the black side of things."

"No, no; of course not," said the stricken man. "I shall be better soon, Jack; better soon. I'm getting ready to fight it."

"That's right; and before long you will have the boy marching into the room, or else sending you a letter."

"Yes, yes," said Captain Revel, with a sad smile, and in a manner totally different from that which he generally assumed, "he'll soon come back or write."

"But, poor fellow! he does not think so," said Captain Lawrence to himself, as Nic's father relapsed into thoughtful silence.

"Solly, my lad," said the visitor, when he felt that he must return to his vessel, "your master has got a nasty shock over this business."

"Ay, ay, sir; and he aren't the only one as feels it. I ought never to ha' left Master Nic's side; but he put me in my station, and, of course, I had to obey orders."

"Of course, my lad. Here, we must make the best of it, and hope and pray that the boy will turn up again all right."

Solly shook his head sadly.

"Ah, don't do that, my man," cried Captain Lawrence. "You a sailor, too. There's life in a mussel, Solly. A man's never dead with us till he is over the side with a shot at his heels."

"That's true, sir," said the old sailor; "but, you see, I'm afraid. There was some fierce fighting over yonder in the pitch-dark, where the lights weren't showing. Sticks was a-going awful. If my poor boy got one o' they cracks on his head and went beneath, there was plenty o' water to wash him out o' the pool and down the river."

"Yes; but hope for the best, man; hope for the best. Remember the bit of blue that comes in the wind's eye often enough when we're in the worst part of a gale."

"Ay, sir, that's what I do—hope for the best, and that if my poor young master, who was as fine a lad as ever stepped, is done for, I may some day find out who it was that hit that blow, and pay it back."

"No, Solly," said Captain Lawrence sternly. "An English sailor does not take revenge in cold blood for what was done in hot. Never! There, I must get off, and in a few days I hope to be back to see my old friend again. Meanwhile, I know he's in good hands, and that he would not wish to be watched over by any one better than William Solly, his old companion in many a trouble of the past."

"It's very kind o' you to say so, sir," said Solly humbly.

"I only speak the truth, my man," said the visitor. "I have seen a great deal, and Captain Revel has told me more, about what a faithful servant you have been to him. Do all you can to comfort him, for he is terribly changed."

The tears were in old Solly's eyes, and there seemed to be a kink in his throat, as he said huskily:

"Awful, sir. I was a-saying on'y the other day, when the skipper was wherriting hisself about losing a few salmon, and raging and blowing all over the place, that he wanted a real trouble to upset him, and that then he wouldn't go so half-mad-like about a pack o' poachers working the pool. But I little thought then that the real bad trouble was coming so soon; and it has altered him, sewer-ly. Poor Master Nic—poor dear lad! Seems on'y t'other day as I used to carry him sittin' with his little bare legs over my two shoulders, and him holding on tight by my curly hair. Yes, sir, you look; it is smooth and shiny up aloft now, but I had a lot o' short, curly hair then, just like an old Calabar nigger's. And now, on'y to think of it."

"No, don't think of it, my lad, for we are not certain, and we will not give up hope. There, good-bye, Solly, my man. Shake hands."

"Shake—hands, sir—with you, cap'n?"

"No, not with the captain, but with the man who looks upon you as an old friend."

The next minute Solly was alone, rubbing his fist first in one eye and then in the other, twisting the big bony knuckle of his forefinger round so as to squeeze the moisture out.

"Well now," he said, "just look at that! What an old fool I am! Well, if I didn't know as them there drops o' mystur' was 'cause o' my poor lad Master Nic, I should ha' thought it was all on account o' what Cap'n Lawrence said. 'Friend!' he says. Well, I like that. I s'pose it's 'cause I've allus tried to do my dooty, though I've made a horful muddle on it more'n once."

Chapter Fourteen.

From Darkness to Light.

The next time the doctor came below to see his patients he examined Pete Burge.

"Humph!" he ejaculated. "Lucky for you, my man, that you have such a thick skull. You'll do now; but you've had a narrow escape. There, you can go up on deck every day a bit, but keep out of the sun; it's very hot, and getting hotter. It will do you more good than stopping down in this black hole."

"Thank ye, master," said Pete; and he lay still in his hammock, waiting for the doctor to go on deck before getting out and beginning to dress.

"Look here," said the doctor; "you are not off the sick-list yet, and you will come down and look after this lad till he is fit to go up.—Well, how are you, my lad?—Hold that light closer," he continued, turning to his assistant. "Humph! fever stronger.—Has he been talking to you—sensibly?"

"Yes, zir," replied Pete. "A good deal muddled at first, but he began asking questions at last."

"What about?"

"Didn't know how he come here, and I had to tell him."

"Yes! What then?"

"Give a zort of a groan, zir, and been talking to hisself ever zince."

"Humph! Poor wretch," muttered the doctor, and he gave some instructions to his assistant before turning once more to Pete:

"Look here, you had better stay with your mate when you are not on deck. If he gets worse you can fetch me."

"Where shall I find you, zir?" asked Pete.

"Ask one of the men."

Pete began to dress as soon as he was alone, and found that it was no easy task on account of a strange feeling of giddiness; but he succeeded at last, and stepped to Nic's hammock and laid a cool hand upon the poor fellow's burning brow. Then he went on deck, glad to sit down right forward in the shade cast by one of the sails and watch the blue water whenever the vessel heeled over.

The exertion, the fresh air, and the rocking motion of the ship produced a feeling of drowsiness, and Pete was dropping off to sleep when he started into wakefulness again, for half-a-dozen men came up a hatchway close at hand, with the irons they wore clinking, to sit down upon the deck pretty near the convalescent.

Pete stared as he recognised Humpy Dee and five other partners in the raid.

"There, what did I tell you?" said the first-named, speaking to his companions, but glaring savagely at Pete the while. "There he is. I allus knowed it. He aren't in irons. It was his doing. Give warning, he did, and they brought the sailor Jacks up. It was a regular trap."

"What do you mean?" said Pete wonderingly.

"What I say. I always knew you'd turn traitor and tell on us."

"You don't know what you're talking about," cried Pete. "Look here, lads."

The men he addressed uttered a low growl and turned from him in disgust.

"Oh, very well," said Pete bitterly; "if you like to believe him instead of me, you can."

"I told you so," went on Humpy Dee, whose countenance looked repulsive now from a patch of strips of sticking-plaster upon his forehead; "and he says I don't know what I'm talking about."

"That's right," said Pete; "you don't."

"Maybe; but I do now. Look ye here, Pete Burge; it's your doing that we're here. Nearly the whole lot on us took—there, you can see some of 'em sailors now. Pressed men. They took the pick of us; but we're not good enough, we're not, while you're to be a bo'sun, or some'at o' that sort, you expect. But you won't, for, first chance I get, Pete Burge, I'm going to pitch you overboard, or put a knife in your back; so look out."

"You don't know what you're talking about," said Pete again, for nothing better occurred to him; and as the charge seemed to have gone home for truth with the other unfortunates, one and all embittered by sickness, injuries, and confinement in irons below deck, Pete sulkily did as they did, turned away, confident that Humpy Dee's threat would not be put in force then; for a marine was standing sentry over them, till the men in irons were marched below, Pete finding that, as one on the sick-list, he was free to go up or down when he liked.

During the next fortnight the man puzzled himself as to what was to become of them. He had seen others of his companions often enough, going about their duties; but every one turned from him with a scowl of dislike, which showed that the charge Humpy had made had gone home, and that all believed he had betrayed them.

The consequence was that he passed much of his time below decks, and preferred to come up for his breath of fresh air after dark, passing his time beside Nic's hammock, thinking what he ought to do about him, and making up his mind what it was to be as soon as the poor fellow grew better and fully recovered his senses.

"I'll tell the doctor then," he said to himself. "There's no good in telling him now, for if I did they'd take him away and put him in a cabin, where it would only be lonesome for him and for me too; and no one would wait on him better than I do."

But Nic did not get better, as Pete wished, nor yet as the doctor essayed to make him.

"It has got on his brain, poor fellow," said that gentleman one day, when the patient was able to walk about, apparently nearly well, but his mind quite vacant. He talked, but the past was quite a blank.

"But he'll get it off, won't he, zir?" said Pete, who felt the time to speak had come.

"Some day, my lad. I dare say his memory will come back all of a sudden when he is stronger and better able to bear his trouble; so perhaps it's all a blessing for him in disguise."

There was so much in this that Pete felt that it was not the time to speak yet.

"What good can it do him till he can think?" he said to himself. "It will only be like me losing a mate as can be a bit o' comfort, now every one's again' me. I mean to stick to him till he can speak out and tell 'em as I didn't inform again' the others."

So Pete held his tongue, and being so much below, was almost forgotten, save by the men of the watches who had to bring the two sick men their rations; and finally he left it till it was too late. For he awoke one morning to find that they were in port in a strange land, and in the course of the morning the word was passed to him and his unfortunate companion to "tumble up."

"Here, master," he said to Nic; "you're to come up."

Nic made no objection, but suffered himself to be led on deck, where he stood, pale and thin, the wreck of his former self, blinking in the unwonted light, and trying to stare about him, but in a blank way, ending by feeling for and clinging to Pete's arm.

Very little time was afforded the latter for looking about, wondering what was to happen next; all he saw on deck was a group of marines and about a couple of dozen of the sailors doing something to one of the boats, while the officers were looking on.

The next minute his attention was taken by the beautiful country spreading out beyond the shore, a quarter of a mile away across the sparkling waters of the harbour.

But there was something else to take his attention during the next minute, for there was the clanking of irons, and he saw Humpy Dee and his five companions marched up from below to be called to where he was standing with Nic.

The poachers looked repellent enough as they followed Humpy Dee's example, and scowled at the pair who had come up from the sick bay, and seemed to receive little sympathy from those who were looking on. Then there was an order given by one of the officers, and the crew of the boat climbed quickly in, while the marines came up behind the prisoners.

"They're going to take us ashore," thought Pete excitedly, and the idea had hardly been grasped, before a couple of old hats were handed to him and his companion by the sergeant of marines.

"They're going to put uz with Humpy and that lot," said Pete to himself excitedly; "and I must speak now."

He spoke. It was hurriedly and blunderingly done, and the officer whom he addressed looked at him frowningly.

"What!" he cried; "this man is not one of you—one of the gang taken that night?"

"No, master; he's a gentleman, and took by mistake."

Humpy Dee's eyes flashed, and he burst into a coarse laugh.

"Silence, you scoundrel!—How dare you?" cried the officer angrily.

"Couldn't help it, master," growled Humpy. "Make a horse laugh to hear such gammon."

"What! Do you say that what he tells me is not true?"

"It is true, master," cried Pete, "every word—"

"All lies," snarled the poacher savagely. "He was in the fight, and got hurt. He's one of us. That Pete Burge peached on us, and brought the sailor Jacks on us; and he wants to get out of it to let us go alone. Lies, captain; all lies."

"What do you say, my men?" said the officer sternly, turning to Humpy's companions.

"Same as he does," cried the pressed men in chorus.

"And you?" cried the officer, turning to Nic. "Are you one of this fellow's comrades?"

"No, master, he aren't," cried Pete; "he aren't, indeed. He's nought to me. He's—"

"Silence, sir!" roared the officer. "You, sir," he continued, turning to Nic, "speak out. Are you one of this fellow's comrades?"

Nic looked at him blankly, and there was silence on the deck, as the various groups stood there in the burning sunshine.

"Well, sir, why don't you answer?" cried the officer.

Nic's answer was in dumb-show, for, poor fellow, he did not grasp a word. He knew that the man by his side had been with him a great deal, and nursed and helped him, speaking soothingly when he was at his worst—every one else seemed strange; and without a word he smiled sadly in Pete's face and took hold of his arm.

"That will do," said the officer, who had his orders to carry out. "In with them!"

The marines laid their hands on Nic's and Pete's shoulders, while the sergeant signed to the others to climb into the boat; Humpy Dee turning, as he got in last, to give Pete a savage look of triumph.

Pete turned sharply to the marine who was urging him to the side.

"Tell me, mate," he whispered quickly; "just a word. Where are we going to be took?"

The marine glanced swiftly aside to see if it was safe to answer, and then whispered back:

"Off to the plantations, I s'pose. There, keep a good heart, lad. It aren't for ever and a day."

The plantations—to work as a kind of white slave for some colonist far-away.

Pete, in his ignorance, only grasped half the truth; but that half was bad enough to make him sink down in the boat as it was lowered from the davits, put his lips close to Nic's ear, and groan more than say:

"Oh, Master Nic, lad, what have you done?"

Then the boat kissed the water; the order was given; the oars fell with a splash; and, as the men gave way, Pete Burge darted a wild look about him, to find Humpy Dee just at his back, glaring malignantly, and as if about to speak, as he leaned forward.

But no word came, for the marine sergeant clapped a hand upon his shoulder and thrust him back.

"All right," said Humpy Dee; "my time'll come bimeby. Better than being a pressed man, after all."

Nic had been a long while in the darkness below deck, and his eyes were feeble; but, as the boat glided on rapidly towards the shore, they became more accustomed to the light, and he gazed wonderingly about in his confused state, seeing nothing of the trouble ahead, only the fact that he was approaching the far-stretching, sun-brightened shore.

Chapter Fifteen.

Humpy Dee's little Threats.

However much he might have been disposed to make a fresh appeal on his companion's behalf, Pete had no opportunity; for, upon the boat being run alongside of a roughly-made wharf, he and the others were hurried out and marched away to a kind of warehouse, and the care of them handed over to some people in authority, by whom they were shut-in, glad of the change from the broiling sun outside to the cool gloom of the interior, lit only by a grated window high up above the door, from which the rays streamed across the open roof, leaving the roughly-boarded floor in darkness.

After a few minutes the eyes became accustomed to the gloom, and the men seated themselves upon the empty chests and barrels lying about, Pete securing one for Nic, who sat down mechanically, with his head thrown back so that he could gaze at the light. Pete contented himself with the rough floor, where he half-lay, listening to his companions in misfortune, half-a-dozen yards away, as they talked over their position and wondered where they were to go—to a man keeping aloof from Pete, the traitor they accredited with bringing them to their present state.

The men were better informed than Pete had been, his stay in company with Nic and the dislike in which he was held by his old companions having kept him in ignorance of facts which they had picked up from the sailors. And now Pete gradually grasped in full that of which he had previously only had an inkling—that the pick of the prisoners had been reserved for man-o'-war's-men, those who were considered unsuitable having been reserved for handing over to the colonists. This was in accordance with a custom dating as far back as the days of Cromwell, the Protector being accredited with ridding himself of troublesome prisoners by shipping them off to the plantations as white slaves, most of them never to return.

"Well," said Humpy Dee aloud, in the course of conversation, "I suppose it means work."

"Yes," said another; "and one of the Jacks told me you have to hoe sugar-cane and tobacco and rice out in the hot sun, and if you don't do enough you get the cat."

"If any one tries to give me the lash," growled Humpy, "he'll get something he won't like."

"They'll hang you or shoot you if you try on any games, old lad," said another of the men.

"Maybe, if they can," said Humpy, with a laugh. "Perhaps we may be too many for them. I mean to take to the woods till I can get taken off by a ship."

"Ah, who knows?" said another. "I aren't going to give up. Place don't look so bad. See that river as we come up here?"

"Of course," growled Humpy.

"Well, I dare say there'll be salmon in it, same as there is at home."

"Tchah!" cried Humpy; "not here. This is foreign abroad man. You'll get no salmon now."

"Well, any fish'll do," said another of the men. "The place don't look bad, and anything's better than being shut down below them decks. 'Nough to stifle a man. I know what I'm going to do, though, along with them as like to join me."

"You're going to do what I tells you," said Humpy Dee sourly; "I'm going to be head-man here; and if you don't you'll find yourself wishing you hadn't been born."

The man growled something in an undertone, and Humpy made an offer at him as if to strike, causing his companion in misfortune to flinch back to avoid the expected blow.

"Look here, boys," said Humpy; "if every one here's going to try to do things on his own hook we shall do nothing, so what you've got to do is to stick by me. We're not going to be sold here like a gang o' black slaves."

"But we are sold," said the man who had shrunk away.

"Never mind that; we're not going to work, then," said Humpy. "We're going to slip off into the woods, get to that there river, and do something better than spear or bale out salmon. We're going to take the first boat we see and get round to the coast, and then keep along till we find a ship to take us off."

"Well, that's what I meant," said the other man.

"Then you'll be all right," said Humpy.

So far, without paying attention, Pete had heard every word, and his blood began to course faster through his veins at the thought of escaping and helping Nic back to his friends; but, though he strove hard, not another word reached his ears; for Humpy leaned forward and began speaking in a hoarse whisper, his companions bending towards him, as he said with a peculiar intensity:

"We've got to get back home, lads, and not stop here to rot in the sun to make money for whoever's bought us; but there's something to do first."

"What?" said one of the men, for Humpy Dee had stopped and sat in the gloom, glaring savagely at the farther side of the place.

"Wait, and you'll hear," was the reply; and there was another pause, during which Nic uttered a low, weary sigh, and let himself fall sideways, so that his head sank in Pete's lap, and, utterly exhausted, he dropped off to sleep.

"You know how it all was," Humpy went on at last. "I aren't going to name no names, but some 'un was jealous-like o' me, and wanting to take the lead always; and, when he found he couldn't, he goes and blabs to the young master yonder. Well, we're not going to take him back—we've not going to tell him how we're going to do it."

"Have told him. Spoke loud enough," said the man who had received the rebuff.

Humpy leaned towards him, and with a peculiar, savage air, said in a husky whisper:

"Look here, mate; there's only room for one to lead here. If you aren't satisfied you can go and sit along with them two and sham sick, like Pete Burge has all through the voyage."

"Well, don't bite a man's head off," said the other. "Who wants to lead?"

"You do, or you wouldn't talk like a fool. Think I'm one, mates?—think I'm going to do as I said, and let him go and blab, so as to get into favour here? That's just what I don't mean to do."

"Then what are you going to do?" said his fellow-prisoner; but for a few moments Humpy only glared at him without speaking. At last, though, he whispered:

"I mean for us to go off together and get free; and as for some one else, I mean for us all to give him something to remember us by afore we go."

Chapter Sixteen.

Human Cattle.

The prisoners had been sitting in the dark warehouse-like place for some hours, Nic sleeping soundly, and Pete watching and listening to his companions in misfortune, judging from their

behaviour that he was to be treated as an outcast, but caring little, for he was conscious of having been true to them in their nefarious doings.

"Let them think what they like," he said to himself. "Humpy has got that into their heads, and if I talk to them for a week they won't believe me."

Then he began to muse upon the subject which forms seven-eighths of a prisoner's thoughts—how he and Nic were to escape, and whether it would be possible to get to a boat and float down the river of which they had had a glimpse, and of which he had heard his companions speaking, when suddenly there was the deep, heavy barking of a dog, followed by that of two more; and, as he listened, the sounds came nearer and nearer, in company with the shuffling of feet. Voices were heard too, and directly after there was a loud snuffling sound and a deep growling, as the dogs they had heard thrust their noses under the big door, tore at it, and growled savagely, till a fierce voice roared:

"Come here! Lie down!" and there was a crack of a whip, and a sharp yelp to indicate that one of the dogs had received a blow.

Directly after there was the rattle of a big key in the lock, the bolt snapped back, and the door was thrown open, to fill the place with the glow of the afternoon sunshine; and three great hounds bounded in, to rush at once for the prisoners and begin snuffing at them, growling loudly the while.

"Call those dogs off, Saunders," said a stern voice, as the entrance was darkened by the figures of a group of men.

"In a moment," was the reply, made by a tall, active-looking man, "They only want to know the new hands, and their flavour.—Here: down, boys!"

The speaker accompanied his order with a sharp crack of the whip, and the dogs came back unwillingly from the groups seated on the floor.

"Take care," said the first speaker; "that man has a knife."

Pete turned sharply, to see that a knife-blade was gleaming in Humpy Dee's hand.

"Knife, has he?" said the man addressed as Saunders, and he stepped forward to where Humpy was crouching down.

"Give me that knife," he said sharply.

"I don't want to be eat by dogs," said Humpy in a low, surly tone.

"Give me that knife," was reiterated sternly, "or I set the dogs to hold you while I take it away."

Humpy hesitated for a moment and glared in the speaker's eyes; but he read there a power which was too much for him, and he closed the blade with a snap and slowly held it up.

The man snatched it from him with his left hand, and the next instant there was a sharp whish through the air and a smart crack, as the stinging lash of a whip fell across Humpy's shoulder, making him utter a yell of rage.

"Saunders, Saunders!" said the first speaker reproachfully.

"All right, Mr Groves; I know what I'm about," said the man sharply. "That fellow was armed with a knife which he must have stolen from one of the sailors; and he was ready to use it. The sooner a savage brute like that is taught his position here the better for him. You have done your part and handed the scoundrels over to me, so please don't interfere."

The first speaker shrugged his shoulders, and turned to a couple of men who were carrying a basket and a great pitcher; while Saunders went on sharply:

"You hear what I am saying, my lads; so understand this: You have been sent out here from your country because you were not fit to stay there; and you will have to serve now up at your proprietor's plantation. Behave yourselves, and you will be well fed, and fairly treated over your work; but I warn you that we stand no nonsense here. The law gives us power to treat you as you deserve. Our lives are sacred; yours are not—which means, as Mr Groves here will tell you, that if you venture to attack any one you will be shot down at sight, while I may as well tell you now that we shall fire at any man who attempts to escape."

Pete's head gave a throb, and his hand glided slowly to Nic's and held it tightly.

"When you get up to the plantation you will see for yourselves that you cannot get away, for you will have jailers there always ready to watch you or hunt you down. There are three of them," he continued, pointing to the dogs which crouched on the

warehouse floor, panting, with their long red tongues out and curled up at the ends.

At their master's gesture the sagacious animals sprang up and gazed eagerly in his face.

"Not now, boys; lie down.—Ah, what's that?" he cried sharply, and the dogs made a movement as if to rush at the prisoners, for Humpy leaned sideways and whispered to his nearest companion:

"More ways than one o' killing a dog."

"Talking about the dogs," said the other surlily. "You are making yourself a marked man, my friend. Take care. Who are these—the two who have been in hospital, Mr Groves?"

"I suppose so," was the reply.

"What's the matter with you?" said the overseer—for such he proved to be—addressing Pete. "Jump up."

Pete softly lifted Nic's head from his knee and rose quickly.

"Was cut down, sir," said Pete; "but I'm getting better fast now."

"Good job for you. Now, you, sir; wake up."

The overseer raised the whip he held, to make a flick at Nic as he lay soundly asleep; but Pete stepped forward to save his companion, and in bending over him received the slight cut himself without flinching, though the lash made him feel as if he had been stung.

"He has been a'most dead, zir," said Pete sharply; "but he's getting better now fast. Hasn't got his zenses, though."

"Wake him up, then," said the overseer sharply; "and you can get your meal now.—Here, my lads, bring that stuff here and serve it out."

Pete obeyed the order given, and began by gently shaking Nic, who made no sign. Pete shook him again more firmly, starting violently the next moment, for, unnoticed, one of the great hounds had approached him and lowered its muzzle to sniff at the prostrate man.

Pete's first instinctive idea was to strike fiercely at the savage-looking intruder, but fortunately he held his hand and bent over his companion wonderingly, and hardly able to believe what he saw; for as the dog nuzzled about Nic's face, the young man, partly aroused by the shaking, opened his eyes, looked vacantly at the brute for some moments, and then, as if his intellectual powers were returning, he smiled, the animal stopping short and staring down at him closely.

"Well, old fellow," he said gently; "whose dog are you?"

Pete looked up sharply, and saw that every one's attention was centred on the basket and pitcher, the two men serving out the provisions and their two superiors looking on.

Then he glanced back again, to see in horror that Nic had raised his hand to the dog's muzzle, and followed that up by taking hold of and passing the animal's long, soft ears through his hand.

Pete would have seized the dog, but he felt paralysed by the thought that if he interfered he might make matters worse; and then his heart seemed to rise in his throat, for the great hound uttered a deep, short bark, which had the effect of bringing the others to its side.

"Quiet, you, sirs!" cried their master, but he did not turn his head, and the three dogs now pressed round Nic, the first planting his fore-paws on the young man's chest, blinking at him with his jaws apart and the long red tongue playing and quivering between the sets of keen milk-white teeth, evidently liking the caresses it received, and of which the other two appeared to be jealous, for they suddenly began to whimper; and then the first threw up its head, and all three broke into a loud baying.

"Quiet, there!" roared Saunders, and he turned sharply now, saw what had taken place, and came back cracking his whip. "Ah!" he shouted. "Get back! How dare you?"

The dogs growled, stood fast, and barked at him loudly.

"Good boys, then!" cried Saunders. "Yes, it's all right; you've found him. There, that will do."

The dogs began to leap and bound about the place, while their master turned to Pete.

"Why didn't you call me?" he said. "Have they bitten him?"

"No; haven't hurt him a bit," said Pete quietly.

"Lucky for him," said the man. "There, you see what they're like, and know what you have to expect—What?"

"I said, are they your dogs?"

Pete stared, for it was Nic who spoke, perfectly calmly, though in a feeble voice.

"Yes," replied Saunders. "Why?"

"I could not help admiring them. They are magnificent beasts."

"I am glad you like them, sir," said Saunders, with a mocking laugh; and he turned and strode away, to order the men to take some of the food they had brought to the other two prisoners, leaving Nic gazing after him.

"Rather brusque," he said, half to himself, and then he passed his hand over his eyes, drew a long, deep, restful breath, and turned over as if to go to sleep again; but he started up on his elbow instead as he encountered Pete's face, and a look of horror and dislike contracted his own.

"You here?" he said wonderingly.

"Hush! Don't speak aloud, dear lad," whispered Pete excitedly.

"Dear lad?"

"Master Nic Revel, then. You haven't quite come-to yet. You don't remember. You were took bad again after being bad once—when you asked me questions aboard ship, and I had to tell you."

"Taken bad—aboard ship?"

"Here you are; catch hold," said a voice close to them; and one of the men handed each half a small loaf, while his companion filled a tin mug that must have held about half-a-pint, and offered it to Nic.

The young man had let the great piece of bread fall into his lap, but the gurgling sound of the water falling into the mug seemed to rouse a latent feeling of intense thirst, and he raised himself

more, took the vessel with both hands and half-drained it, rested for a few moments, panting, and then drank the rest before handing the tin back with a sigh of content.

"No, no; hold it," said the man sharply; and Nic had to retain it in his trembling hands while it was refilled.

"There, give it to your mate," said the water-bearer.

The two young men's eyes met over the vessel in silence, Nic's full of angry dislike, Pete's with an appealing, deprecating look, which did not soften Nic's in the least.

"Well, why don't you take it?" said the man with the pitcher.

"Don't seem to kinder want it now," replied Pete hoarsely.

"Drink it, man, and don't be a fool. You'll be glad of it long before you get there. Sun's hot yet, and the water's salt for miles, and then for far enough brackish."

Nic looked at the speaker wonderingly, for the blank feeling seemed to be coming with the forerunner of the peculiar sensation of confusion which had troubled him before, and he looked from one to the other as if for help; while Pete took the mug and drained it, but contented himself with slipping his bread inside the breast of his shirt, and stood looking down at Nic, whose lips parted to speak, but no words came.

"Seem decent sort of fellows," said the water-bearer, as he turned off towards the door with his companion; and the dogs rose to follow them, sniffing at the basket.

"Yes, poor beggars!" said the other. "Whatever they've been up to in the old country, they've got to pay pretty dearly for it now."

Nic's hearing was acute enough now, and he heard every word.

"Here, you," he gasped painfully. "Call them back."

"What for, Master Nic?" said Pete in an appealing whisper. "Don't; you mustn't now. Ask me for what you want."

"I want to know what all this means," panted the young man. "Why am I here? What place is this? I'm not—I will know."

"No, no; don't ask now, Master Nic," whispered Pete. "You aren't fit to know now. I'm with you, my lad, and I swear I won't forsake ye."

"You—you will not forsake me?" said Nic, with a look of horror.

"Never, my lad, while I've got a drop o' blood in my veins. Don't—don't look at me like that. It weren't all my fault. Wait a bit, and I'll tell you everything, and help you to escape back to the old country."

"To the old country!" whispered Nic, whose voice was panting again from weakness. "Where are we, then?"

"Amerikee, among the plantations, they say."

"But—but why? The plantations? What does it mean?"

"Work," said Saunders, who had come up behind them. "Now then, look sharp, and eat your bread. You'll get no more till to-morrow morning, and in less than half-an-hour we shall start."

"Start?" cried Nic huskily, as he clapped his hands to his head and pressed it hard, as though he felt that if he did not hold on tightly his reason would glide away again.

"Yes, man, start," said Saunders. "Can you two fellows row?"

"He can't, sir; he's too weak," cried Pete eagerly; and the overseer's face contracted. "But I can. Best man here with an oar. I can pull, sir, enough for two."

"I'll put you to the proof before you sleep," said the overseer sharply. "Now, Mr Groves, I'm at your service. I suppose I have some papers to sign?"

"Yes," said the agent, and he led the way, while the overseer followed, closing the door, placing a whistle to his lips and blowing a shrill note which was answered by a deep baying from the dogs.

"Escape!" muttered Nic wildly. "Plantations! Why, I shall be a slave!"

"No, no, my lad; don't take it like that. I'll help you to get away."

"Will ye?" growled Humpy Dee, coming towards them. "Then I tells that chap next time he comes. I splits on you as you splits on we; so look out, I say, both of you; look out!"

"It's a lie, Master Nic—a lie," cried Pete fiercely. "I swear to you, I never—"

Pete caught at the young man's arm as he spoke, and then loosened it with a groan, for, with a look of revulsion, Nic cried hoarsely:

"Don't touch me; don't come near me. Wretch—villain! This is all your work."

"And so say we, my fine fellow," cried Humpy Dee, whose eyes sparkled with malignant joy. "His doing, every bit, 'cept what you put in, and for that you've got to take your share the same as us. And all because a few poor fellows wanted a bit o' salmon. Hor, hor, hor! I say, take it coolly. No one won't believe ye, and you may think yourself lucky to get off so well."

Nic turned from the man with a look of disgust, and sat up, resting his throbbing head in his hands; while, as Humpy Dee went back to his companions, whistling as he went, Pete threw himself upon the floor, watching him, with his hands opening and shutting in a strange way, as if they were eager to seize the brutal ruffian by the throat.

Chapter Seventeen.

Chains and Slavery.

Pete calmed down after a while, and began to feel a bit sulky. He had common-sense enough to begin looking at the state of affairs from a matter-of-fact point of view, and he lay conning the position over.

"Just as he likes," he said. "He pitches me over, and won't have any more to do with me. Well, it aren't no wonder, zeeing what I've been. Wonder what made me turn so zoft and zilly about him! Zeeing how hard it was for him to be zarved as he was, and then hooked off along with us."

"Dunno that it's any worse for him than it is for me," he muttered; "but zeemed to feel a bit sorry about him, poor lad!—"

there I go again: poor lad! No more poor lad than I be. Got it into my thick head that it was nice to help him while he was so bad, and that, now our lads have pitched me overboard, we was going to be mates and help one another. But we aren't, for he's pitched me overboard too."

"Well," muttered Pete, with a bitter laugh, "I can zwim as well as most on 'em, and I shan't hurt much; and as for him, he must take his chance with the rest on us. He's got his wits back again, and don't zeem like to go wool-gathering again; and, if he's sharp, he'll speak up and make that t'other man understand it's all a blunder about him being sent off along o' we. But there, he wants to go his own fashion, zo he must. But if I was him I should kick up a dust before we start, and have myself zent back home by the next ship."

He glanced in the gloom at where Nic was seated, and a feeling of sorrow for the poor fellow filled him again; but after the rebuff he had received he fought it off, and began to watch Humpy Dee and the others, as they sat together talking in a low tone, and then to meditate on their position towards himself.

"They're half-afraid of Humpy," he thought, "and he's made 'em think that I zet the sailors at them. If I go on talking till it's a blue moon they won't believe me, zo things must go their own way, and zome day they'll find Humpy out; on'y I'm not going to let him do as he likes with me. This isn't going to be a very cheerful zort of life out here; but, such as it is, it's better than no life at all; zo I aren't going to let him pitch me into the river or down some hole, or knock me on the head, or stick a knife into me. That won't do. It's murder—leastwise it is at home; p'raps it aren't out here. Zeems not after the way that chap talked about shooting us down and zetting them dogs at us. Why, one of 'em's stronger than us, and a zet-to wi' one of 'em wouldn't be nice. Bit of a coward, I s'pose, for I can't abide being bitten by a dog."

"Best thing I can do will be to slip off first chance; for I zeem, what with Humpy and these folk, to have dropped into a nasty spot. Dessay I can take care of myself, and—nay, that won't do; zeem sneaky-like to go and leave that poor lad, for I do zort o' like him. Wonderful how they dogs took to him. Nay, that aren't wonderful. Got a lot o' zense, dogs have. Allus zeem to take to zick people and little tiny children, and blind folk too. How they like them too!"

At that moment there was a deep baying sound not far-away, and Pete had not long to wait before there were steps, the door

was unlocked and thrown open, and the overseer entered, accompanied by the dogs, and followed by a party of blacks, one of whom carried a roughly-made basket.

They were big, muscular fellows, and shiny to a degree whenever the light caught their skins, a good deal of which was visible, for their dress consisted of a pair of striped cotton drawers, descending half-way to the knee, and a sleeveless jacket of the same material, worn open so that neck and breast were bare.

The dogs barked at the prisoners, and repeated their examination by scent, ending by going well over Nic, who made no attempt to caress them, nor displayed any sign of fear, but sat in his place stolidly watching the proceedings, the dogs ending their nasal inspection by crouching down and watching him.

The overseer was alone now, and his first proceeding was to take his stand by the black, who had set down the heavy basket, and call Humpy Dee to come forward, by the name of Number One.

The man rose heavily, and this seemed to be a signal for the three hounds to spring to their feet again, making the man hesitate.

"Them dogs bite, master?" he said.

"Yes; they'll be at your throat in a moment if you make the slightest attempt to escape," said the overseer sharply.

"Who's going to try to escape?" grumbled Humpy.

"You are thinking of it, sir," said the overseer. "Mind this," he continued—drawing the light jacket he wore aside and tapping his belt, thus showing a brace of heavy pistols—"I am a good shot, and I could easily bring you down as you ran."

"Who's going to run?" grumbled Humpy. "Man can't run with things like these on his legs."

"I have seen men run pretty fast in fetters," said the overseer quietly; "but they did not run far. Come here."

Humpy shuffled along two or three steps, trailing his irons behind him, and the overseer shouted at him:

"Pick up the links by the middle ring, sir, and move smartly."

He cracked his whip, and a thrill ran through Nic.

Humpy did as he was told, and walked more quickly to where the overseer stood; but before he reached him the herculean black who stood by his basket, which looked like a coarsely-made imitation of the kind used by a carpenter for his tools, clapped a hand upon the prisoner's shoulder and stopped him short, making Humpy turn upon him savagely.

"Ah!" roared the overseer, as if he were speaking to one of the dogs.

Humpy was overawed, and he stood still, while the black bent down, took a ball of oakum out of the basket, cut off about a foot, passed the piece through the centre ring of the irons, and deftly tied it to the prisoner's waist-belt. Then, as Nic and Pete watched, the action going on fascinating them, the black made a sign to one of his companions, who dropped upon his knees by the basket, took out a hammer, and handed it to the first black. Then the kneeling man lifted out a small block of iron, which looked like a pyramid with the top flattened, clapped it on the floor, and the first black began to manipulate Humpy as a blacksmith would a horse he was about to shoe, dragging him to the little anvil with one hand, using the hammer-handle to poke him into position with the other.

"Going to take off his irons," thought Pete, and the same idea flashed across Nic's mind.

He was mistaken.

Another black stepped up, as if fully aware of what was necessary, and stood behind Humpy, ready to hold him up when necessary; for the second black now seized one of the prisoner's ankles, lifted his foot on to the little anvil, and the first examined the rivet, grunted his dissatisfaction, and Humpy's foot was wrenched sidewise by one man, who held the rivet upon the anvil, while his leader struck it a few heavy blows to enlarge the head and make it perfectly safe.

This done, Humpy was marched nearer the door, scowling savagely at having had to submit to this process; but he grinned his self-satisfaction as he saw his companions brought forward in turn for their irons to be examined—one to have them replaced by a fresh set, which were taken from the

basket, and whose rings were tightly riveted about his ankles, the rivets of the old ones being quite loose.

The men were ranged near the entrance, which, at a look from the overseer, was now guarded by the three unoccupied blacks.

"Now you," said the overseer to Pete, who rose from where he sat alone and approached the anvil with a curious sensation running through him.

"Why didn't they iron you?" said the overseer harshly.

"Wounded and sick," replied Pete gruffly.

"Ah, well, you are not wounded and sick now.—He's a big, strong fellow, Sam. Give him a heavy set."

The big black showed his fine set of white teeth. A set of fetters was taken from the basket, and with Pete's foot held in position by the second black—a foot which twitched and prickled with a strong desire to kick—the first ring was quickly adjusted, a soft iron rivet passed through the two holes, and then the head was rested upon the little block of iron, and a few cleverly-delivered blows from the big black's hammer spread the soft iron out into a second head, and the open ring was drawn tight.

The second ankle-ring was quickly served in the same way, and the centre link was lifted and tied to the prisoner's waist-belt, Pete turning scarlet, and wiping the perspiration from his dripping brow from time to time.

"Over yonder with the others!"

There was a movement among the men at the door as this order was given, and Pete winced; but even a man newly fettered can still feel pride, and the poor fellow determined that his old comrades should not think he was afraid of them. He walked boldly up to take his place, meeting Humpy's malignant look of triumph without shrinking, and turning quickly directly after with a feeling of pity as he heard the overseer summon Nic to take his place in turn.

"Now's your time, my lad," Pete said to himself. "Speak out like a man, and if you ask me to, I'll back you up—I will."

He looked on excitedly, wondering whether Nic's wits were still with him, as but so short a time ago they had only returned to

him like a flash and then passed away, leaving him, as it were, in the dark.

It was very still in the hot, close place, and every word spoken sounded strangely loud in the calm of the late afternoon.

"Lighter irons," said the overseer to the big black; and there was the clinking sound of the great links as the man handed the fetters from the basket.

"And him not shrinking," thought Pete. "Give me quite a turn. He can't understand."

The big black took the fetters and balanced them in his hand, looking at his superior as much as to say, "Will these do?"

The overseer took a step or two forward and grasped the chain, to stand holding it, gazing frowningly the while at Nic, who met his gaze without blenching.

"Why don't you speak—why don't you speak?" muttered Pete. "Can't you see that now's your time?"

"You've been bad, haven't you?" said the overseer roughly.

Nic raised his hand slowly to his head and touched the scar of a great cut on one side, the discoloration of a bruise on the other.

"But quite well again now?"

Nic smiled faintly.

"I am weak as a child," he replied.

"Humph! Yes," said the overseer, and he threw the chain upon the floor.

Pete, who had been retaining his breath for some moments, uttered a faint exclamation full of relief.

"But why didn't he speak out and tell him?" For a few moments his better feelings urged him to speak out himself; but he shrank from exposing both to the denials of the other men again, and stood frowning and silent.

Then the chance seemed to be gone, for the overseer gave the young prisoner a thrust towards the others, and Nic walked towards them straight for where Pete was waiting. Then he

raised his eyes, saw who was standing in his way, and he went off to his right, to stop beside Humpy Dee, while a feeling of resentment rose hotly in Pete's breast.

"Oh, very well," he muttered to himself; "it's no business of mine."

The next minute the overseer gave a sharp order; the big black raised the basket and put himself at the head of the prisoners; the other slaves took their places on either side, and the overseer followed behind with the dogs, which began to bound about, barking loudly for a minute or two, and then walked quietly as the party left the gloomy warehouse behind.

Chapter Eighteen.

Humpy Dee's Plan goes "a-gley."

It all seemed to Nic like part of some terrible dream, for a strange struggle was going on in his weakened brain, where reason seemed to come and go by pulsations. One minute everything appeared to be real, the next it was dream-like; and he was so convinced that in a short time he would wake up that he walked quietly on side by side with one of the negroes, taking notice of the place, which seemed to be a port, with the beginnings of a town dropped down in a scattered fashion a short distance from the mouth of a river. The houses were of timber, and to each there was a large, roughly fenced-in piece of cultivated ground, with some trees standing, while others had been cut down, leaving the blackened stumps in all directions.

It was a strange mingling of shed, shipbuilding-yard, and store, for many of the erections and their surroundings wore all the aspect of barns. As the little party now tramped on, with the prisoners' fetters giving forth a dull, clanking sound, the aspect of the place grew more and more rustic, the people who stopped to stare fewer, till, as they reached a large boarded house, evidently nearly new, and against whose rough fence a farmer-like man, in a damaged straw hat, was leaning, gazing intently at the prisoners. All beyond seemed trees and wild growth, amidst which the river made a curve, and the trampled track looked more green.

Nic looked half-wonderingly at the man leaning upon the fence, and felt that he was going to speak in commiseration of his

plight; but the next moment his hopes were dashed, for the settler shouted:

"How are you, Master Saunders? How's the Gaffer?"

"All well," said the overseer, with a nod.

"Seems a nice, tidy, strong-limbed lot you've got there, master."

"Oh yes; pretty well."

"Some of all sorts. That's an ugly one," continued the farmer, pointing to Humpy Dee, and mentally valuing him as if he were one in a herd of cattle. "But I daresay he can work."

"He'll have to," said the overseer, and Nic saw that each black face wore a grin, while Humpy was scowling savagely.

"Yes, I should like a lot such as that. 'Member me to the Gaffer. Tell him to look in if he comes to town."

"Yes," thought Nic as they passed on; "it must be a dream, and I shall wake soon."

It grew more and more dream-like to him as the track was followed among the trees till a rough landing-place was reached, formed by some huge stakes driven down into the mud, with heavy planks stretched over to them, and others laid across. The reddening sun was turning the gliding water to gold, as it ran up the river now, for the flood-tide was running fast; and as they drew nearer, Nic caught sight of what looked like the launch of some large vessel swinging by a rope fastened to an upright of the landing-stage.

Just then one of the blacks uttered a peculiar, melodious cry, the great dogs bounded on to the stage and began to bark, and a couple of blacks, dressed like those about him, sprang up in the boat, where they had been lying asleep, and began to haul upon the now unfastened rope to draw the craft up to the stage.

Nic's head was throbbing again, and the unreality and novelty of the scene increased.

"I shall wake soon," he said to himself. "How strange it is!"

For at that moment, as the boat came abreast, he saw one of the great dogs leap from the stage, run to the stern, and sit

down, the others following and joining it behind the seat provided with a back rail.

It seemed to be no new thing to the blacks, for the huge fellow who had acted as smith stepped down into the boat, followed by his assistant, walked aft, and deposited his bag with the dogs, and then stooped down and drew from under the side-seat a couple of muskets, one of which he handed to his assistant, both examining their priming, and then seating themselves one on either side of the boat, with their guns between their legs, watching the embarkation.

"You next," said the overseer to Pete; and the prisoner walked to the edge, made as if to leap, but checked himself and climbed down, feeling that the other way would have been risky, weighted as his legs were by the shackles. "Help your young mate," said the overseer roughly; and Pete's eyes flashed as he stood up and held out his hand to Nic, who shrank from the contact as his wrist was caught. Then he descended feebly into the boat, and then had to be helped right forward, to sit down close to one of the blacks who was now holding on to the woodwork with a boat-hook.

The other prisoners followed awkwardly enough in their irons, and took the places pointed out to them by one of the blacks who had been in charge of the boat.

As the second of the party took his place next to Pete, he hung down his head and whispered:

"Humpy says we're to make a dash for it and take the boat."

Pete started; but the man, under the pretence of adjusting his irons, went on, with his head nearly in his comrade's lap:

"T'others know. We shall push off into the stream, where he can't hit us with his pistols, and we can soon pitch the niggers overboard."

"Silence, there!" shouted the overseer.

The other men descended, and exchanged glances with their companions—glances which Pete saw meant "Be ready!"—and his blood began to dance through his veins.

Should he help, or shouldn't he?

Yes; they were his fellows in adversity, and it was for liberty: he must—he would; and, with his heart beating hard, he prepared for the struggle, feeling that they must succeed, for a blow or two would send the men by them overboard, and a thrust drive the boat gliding swiftly up-stream, the man with the boat-hook having enough to do to hold on.

“Young Nic Revel don’t zeem to understand,” thought Pete; “but he couldn’t help us if he did.”

He had hardly thought this when, in obedience to an order from the overseer, the last man, Humpy Dee, tramped clumsily to the edge and seemed to hesitate, with the result that there was a sharp bark from one of the dogs right astern, and a chill ran through Pete’s burning veins.

“I forgot the dogs!” he said to himself.

“Get down, fool!” cried the overseer, and he struck at the hesitating prisoner with the whip.

It was all a feint on the part of Humpy to gain time and carry out his plan.

He winced as the whip-lash caught him on his leg, and then, instead of descending slowly, leaped down right upon the black who held the boat to the stage by the hook.

It was cleverly done, and acted as intended, for the black was driven over the side, and the prisoner’s weight gave the boat the impetus required, sending it a little adrift into the stream, which began to bear it away, but not before the result of a little miscalculation had made itself evident.

For Humpy Dee had not allowed for the weight and cumbersomeness of his fetters; neither had he given them credit for their hampering nature. He had leaped and suddenly thrust the black overboard, to hang clinging to the boat-hook; but he had been unable to check himself from following; and, as the boat yielded to his weight and thrust, he seemed to take a header over the bow, there was a tremendous splash, and the water was driven over those seated forward.

The two blacks astern leaped up, and the overseer uttered a cry of rage; the water closed over Humpy Dee’s head, while the dogs set up a chorus of baying as the boat glided steadily away.

Chapter Nineteen.

"What'll Massa say?"

The scene taking place before him acted strangely upon Nic. It seemed to rouse him from his dreamy state, and awakened him to a wild pitch of excitement.

He sprang to his feet, and was on the point of springing overboard to the man's help; but a touch from Pete upon the shoulder was enough: he sank down beneath its pressure, weak and helpless as a child.

"What are you going to do?" whispered Pete. "Are you mad?"

"Help! Save him! Can you stand like that and see the man drown before your eyes?"

"What can I do, lad?" growled Pete angrily. "If I go over after him, it's to drown myself. These irons'll stop a man from swimming, and take one to the bottom like a stone."

"Ay, ay; ye can't do 'un," growled one of the other prisoners, in whom the desire for escaping died out on the instant. "Sit still, lad; sit still."

But Pete stood with staring eyes, gazing wildly at the place where his enemy had disappeared; the veins in his forehead swelled, his lips parted, and he panted as he drew his breath, looking ready at any moment to leap overboard and make an effort to save his old companion's life.

Meanwhile the overseer was shouting orders to his blacks ashore as well as to those in the boat, which was gliding faster up the stream, and the men laid down their guns and picked up and put out a couple of oars, the dogs barking frantically the while.

"Pete Burge," whispered one of the men, "we must make friends now. Here's our chance; shall we take it?"

"No, no," cried Pete furiously, but without taking his eyes from where Humpy had disappeared.

"I cannot bear it," panted Nic to himself, as he once more sprang up; and before he could be stayed he dived out of the boat, rose, and struck out for the landing-stage.

Pete shouted at him in his agony, and jumped overboard to save him, forgetting what was bound to happen, and going down like a stone, feet foremost, but rising to the surface again, to fight gallantly in spite of the weight of his irons, and strive to overtake Nic, who, unencumbered, was some yards away.

But it proved to be as Pete had foreseen; there was the gallant will and the strength to obey it, but it was merely a spasmodic force which only endured a minute or two. Then the brave young swimmer's arms turned, as it were, to lead, the power to breast the strong current ceased, and he remained stationary for a moment or two, before being gradually borne backward, his efforts ceasing; while the men in the boat watched him and Pete, who, with the water quite to his nostrils, was swimming with all his strength, but only just able to keep the heavy fetters from dragging him to the bottom.

"Two more on us going," said one of the men. "Here, Bob; come and help. You stop and grab 'em as soon as they're near."

The man and the comrade he had addressed scrambled over the thwarts towards where the two blacks were rowing hard, but hardly holding the heavy boat against the powerful tide; and as soon as the fetters clanked, the dogs barked savagely and leaped up to meet them; but as the intelligent beasts saw the men seize a couple of oars and thrust them over the sides, they stopped short, panting.

"All the better for you," growled one of the men to the dog glaring at him, "for I'd ha' choked you if you'd come at me.—Pull away, blackies."

The additional oars had the right effect, for as the four men pulled with all their might the boat began to stem the current and shorten the distance between it and the two drowning men. But, in spite of his great strength, Pete was being mastered by the heavy weight of the irons, and was getting lower and lower in the water; while Nic's arms had ceased to move, and he was drifting with the tide.

"Keep up; strike out, lads," cried the man in the bows, in agony. "We're coming fast now."

It was not the truth, for the heavy boat was moving very slowly against the swift tide, and the swimmers' fate seemed to be sealed, as the man reached back, got hold of another oar, and thrust it out over the bows, ready for Pete to grasp as soon as he came within reach.

"We shall be too late," groaned the man, with all his enmity against Pete forgotten in those wild moments of suspense. "Here, look out for the oar. Pete, lad, swim back. Oh! poor lad, he can't hear me. He's drownin'—he's drownin'."

Pete could not hear, and if he had heard during his frantic efforts to reach Nic, he would not have heeded, for there was no room in the man's brain in those wild moments for more than that one thought—that he must save that poor, weak fellow's life.

It takes long to describe, but in the real action all was condensed into less than a minute. Pete, who fought wildly, frantically, to keep his head above water, fought in vain, for his fettered legs were fast losing their power, and he was being drawn gradually lower and lower, till, after throwing his head back to gasp for a fresh breath, he straightened his neck again, with the water at his eyes, and saw that what he could not achieve the current had done for him.

He made a wild, last effort, and caught with one hand at the arm just within reach; his fingers closed upon it with a grip of iron, and another hand caught desperately at his hair.

Then the water closed over the pair, joined together in a death-grip, and the tide rolled them unresistingly up the stream.

"Pull, pull!" yelled the man in the bows, as he reached out with his oar; but he could not touch the place where he saw the figures disappear. Quick as thought, though, and with the clever method of one accustomed to the management of a fishing-boat, the man changed his tactics. He laid the oar over the prow, treating the iron stem as a rowlock, and gave a couple of strokes with all his might, pulling the boat's head round, and bringing it well within reach of the spot where Nic's back rose and showed just beneath the surface. Then, leaving the oar, the man reached over, and was just in time to get a good hold, as the oar dropped from the bow into the river, and he was almost jerked out of the boat himself.

"Hold hard, lads, and come and help," he yelled.

The help came; and, with the dogs barking furiously and getting in every one's way, Nic and Pete, tightly embraced, were dragged over into the bottom of the boat, the blacks, as soon as this was done, standing shivering, and with a peculiar grey look about the lips.

At that moment there was a distant hail from the landing-stage, and the big smith pulled himself together and hailed in reply.

"Ah, look!" he cried; "you white fellow lose one oar. Quick, sharp! come and pull. Massa Saunders make trebble bobbery if we lose dat."

The oars were seized, and with two of the prisoners helping to row, the oar was recovered from where it was floating away with the tide, the others trying what they could do to restore the couple, who lay apparently lifeless; while the dog which had behaved so strangely earlier in the day stood snuffing about Nic, ending by planting his great paws upon the poor fellow's chest, licking his face two or three times, and then throwing up his muzzle to utter a deep-toned, dismal howl, in which the others joined.

"Say, um bofe dead," groaned the big smith. "Pull, boy; all pull you bess, and get back to the massa. Oh, lorimee! lorimee! what massa will say along wi' dat whip, all acause we drown two good men, and couldn't help it a bit. Oh, pull, pull, pull! Shub de boat along. What will massa say?"

Chapter Twenty.

Fishing for Men.

Those with the boat had been too much occupied in their own adventure to heed what had taken place at the landing-stage; and, even had they glanced in that direction, the distance the swift tide had carried them up-stream would have made every movement indistinct.

But busy moments had passed there, for the overseer was a man of action, and prompt to take measures toward saving the life of the drowning man. For a human life was valuable in those early days of the American colonies, especially the life of a strong, healthy slave who could work in the broiling sunshine to win the harvest of the rich, fertile soil.

So, as the boat drifted away, he gave his orders sharply, and the black slaves, who had stood helplessly staring, rushed to the help of their companion, who was hanging by the boat-hook, half in the water, afraid to stir lest the iron should give

way and the tide carry him off to where, as he well knew, there were dangers which made his lips turn grey with dread.

The help came just as the poor fellow was ready to lose his hold and slip back into the river, and in another minute he was shivering on the stage.

"Take hold of that boat-hook," cried the overseer, speaking with his eyes fixed upon one spot, where the water ran eddying and forming tiny whirlpools, and not daring to look round for fear of losing sight of the place where it seemed to him that his white slave had gone down like a stone; and this had kept him from giving much heed to the proceedings in the boat.

One of the men seized the pole and waited for the next order.

"He went down there," cried the overseer, pointing. "Sound with the pole, and try how deep it is."

The man obeyed, the pole touching the muddy bottom about four feet below the surface.

"That's right; jump in," cried Saunders.

The man started, and then remained motionless, gazing piteously at his companions.

"Do you hear? Quick!" roared the overseer.

"There big 'gator, sah—'gator gar, sah," cried the man piteously.

"Bah! In with you," cried the overseer fiercely, and he cracked his whip, with the result that the man lowered the pole again, and then half-slipped, half-jumped down into the water, which rose breast-high, and he had to hold on by the boat-hook to keep himself from being swept away.

But the next moment he steadied himself.

"There, wade out," cried Saunders; "quick, before it is too late. Quick, sir; do you hear?"

He cracked his whip loudly as he spoke, and the man raised the pole after separating his legs to increase his support, as he leaned to his left to bear against the rushing tide, which threatened to sweep him from his feet. Then, reaching out, he

thrust down the boat-hook again to get another support before taking a step farther from the staging.

But it was in vain. The water deepened so suddenly that as he took the step the water rose to his nostrils, and he uttered a yell, for the current swept him from his feet to fall over sidewise, and the next moment lay, as it were, upon the surface, with only one side of his face visible; but he was not borne away.

The other blacks, and even the overseer, stared in wonder, for there the man lay, with the tide rushing by him, anchored, as it were, in the stream, rising and falling gently like a buoy for a few moments before beginning to glide with the current.

"It's of no use," said the overseer sharply; "the hound's dead before now. Clumsy fool! Two of you jump in, and one reach out to get hold of Xerxes; we must give the new fellow up."

The men shrank, but they obeyed, lowering themselves into the water and joining hands, one of them taking hold of the end of the staging, while the other waded a step or two and reached out, as he clung to his fellow's extended hand till he was just able to get hold of the cotton jacket.

That was sufficient; the black was drawn a trifle shoreward, and then came more and more, as if dragging with him whatever it was that had anchored him to the bottom.

That mystery was soon explained, for the pole of the boat-hook, to which the poor fellow clung, appeared level with the surface, and as the drag was increased more and more of the pole appeared, till all three were close up to the piles; after which first one and then another climbed out to drag at the long stout staff, till, to the surprise of all, they found that what it was hitched into was the clothes of Humpy Dee, who had lain nearly where he had sunk, anchored by the weight of his irons, in some hole where the pressure of the current was not so great as at the surface.

In another minute the heavy figure had been hauled upon the platform, to lie there apparently dead; while the blacks began, after their homely, clumsy fashion, to try and crush out any tiny spark of life which might remain, and kept on rolling the heavy body to and fro with all their might.

"It's no good, boys," said the overseer, frowning down at the prisoner. "Keep on for a bit, though;" and he turned away to

watch the coming of the boat, just as Pete sat up, looking dazed and strange, and Nic rose to his knees, and then painfully seated himself in his old place.

"Better than I thought for," muttered the overseer. "One gone instead of three—pull, boys," he shouted.

The blacks needed no telling, for they were exerting themselves to the utmost, and in a few minutes one of the blacks on the landing-stage caught the prow with the hook, and the boat was drawn alongside of the woodwork, the dogs having quietly settled themselves in their place behind the stern seat as soon as the two half-drowned men had shown signs of recovery.

The overseer scanned the two dripping figures hard, uttered a grunt, and turned once more to where the blacks were busy still with the heavy figure of Humpy Dee, which they were rolling and rubbing unmercifully, with the water trickling between the boards, and the sunset light giving a peculiarly warm glow to the man's bronzed skin.

"Well," cried the overseer, "is he quite dead?"

"No, sah; am t'ink he quite 'livo," said one of the blacks.

"Eh? What makes you think that?"

"Him bit warm, massa—and just now him say *whuzz, whuzz* when we rub um front."

"No," said the overseer; "impossible. He was under the water too long. Here, what are you doing?"

The black had laid his ear against the patient's breast, but he started up again.

"Lissum; hear wherever him dead, massa. You come, put your head down heah, and you hear um go *wob, wob* berry soffly."

Saunders bent down and laid his head against the man's bull-throat, to keep it there for a few moments.

"No go *wob, wob*, sah?" cried the black. "You two and me gib um big shake. Um go den."

"No, no; let him be," cried the overseer; and the blacks looked on in perfect silence till their tyrant rose slowly to his feet, scowling.

"Clumsy brute," he said, "causing all this trouble and hindrance. Nearly drowned two men. There, two of you take him by his head and heels and drop him in."

"Tie big 'tone to um head first, massa?"

"What!" roared the overseer, so sharply that the black jumped to his feet. "What do you mean?"

"Make um go to de bottom, sah, and neber come up no more."

"Bah! you grinning black idiot. Didn't you tell me he was alive?"

"Yes, sah; quite 'livo, sah."

"Drop him in the boat, then, and hurry about it, or we shan't get up to the farm before the tide turns. There, four of you take him; and you below there, ease him down. Don't let him go overboard again, if you want to keep whole skins."

The men seized the heavy figure by the hands and legs, and bearing it quite to the edge, lowered it down to the others, room being made at the bottom of the boat, where it was deposited with about as much ceremony as a sack of corn. Then, in obedience to another order, the blacks descended, and the overseer stepped down last, to seat himself with his back to the dogs; while the smith and his assistant once more took up their guns and their places as guards. Then the boat was pushed off. Four of the blacks seized the oars, the boat's head swung round, and the next minute, with but little effort, she was gliding rapidly up the muddy stream.

It was dangerous work to begin talking, but as Nic sat there in silence, with his head growing clearer, and gazing compassionately at the prostrate figure, two of the prisoners put their heads together and began to whisper.

"Close shave for old Humpy," said one. "Think he'll come round again?"

"Dunno; but if he does, I'm not going to help in any more games about going off. This job has made me sick."

"He won't want you to; this must have pretty well sickened him if he comes to."

"Mind what you're saying. That there black image is trying to hear every word."

"He can't understand. But I say, the gaffer didn't know how it happened, after all. Thought it was an accident."

"So it was," said the other man, with a grim smile, "for old Humpy. Here, Pete, old man, how are you now?"

Pete looked at the speaker in wonder, then nodded, and said quietly:

"Bit stiff and achey about the back of the neck."

"Mind shaking hands, mate?" said the man in a faint whisper.

"What for?" said Pete sourly.

"'Cause I like what you did, mate. It was acting like a man. But we're not friends over that other business of splitting on us about the salmon."

"Better wait a bit, then, my lad," said Pete. "It aren't good to shake hands with a man like me."

"But I say it is," said the other with emphasis. "The way you went overboard with them heavy irons on, to try and save young master here, sent my heart up in my mouth."

Nic, who had sat listening moodily to the whispered conversation, suddenly looked up in a quick, eager way.

"Say that again," he whispered huskily.

"Say what agen?"

"Did Pete Burge jump in to save my life?"

"Course he did—like a man."

"Oh!" gasped Nic, turning to look Pete wonderingly in the face.

"Silence there!" roared the overseer savagely. "Do you think you've come out here for a holiday, you insolent dogs?"

At the last words the three animals behind the speaker took it to themselves, and began to bark.

"Down! Quiet!" roared the overseer, and the barking of the dogs and his loud command came echoing back from a wood of great overhanging trees, as the boat now passed a curve of the river.

Nic glanced at the overseer, then to right and left of him, before letting his eyes drop on the swiftly-flowing river, to try and think out clearly the answers to a couple of questions which seemed to be buzzing in his brain: "Where are we going? How is this to end?"

But there was no answer. All seemed black ahead as the rapidly-coming night.

Chapter Twenty One.

In Alligator Land.

As the night grew darker, and Nic sat in the forepart of the boat in his drenched clothes, which at first felt pleasantly cool, and then by degrees grew colder until he shivered, his head grew clearer and he became more himself. He was able to grasp more fully his position and how hardly fate had dealt with him.

It was clear enough now; he had been sent off in that terrible blunder as one of the salmon-poachers; and he was there, sold or hired to one of the colonists, to work upon a plantation until he could make his position known to some one in authority, and then all would be right. He felt that it would be of no use to appeal to this brutal slave-driver who had him and his fellow-unfortunates in charge. What he had to do was to wait patiently and make the best of things till then.

His head was rapidly growing so clear now that he could piece the disconnected fragments of his experience together, few as they were, and broken up by his sufferings from the injuries he had received; and, as he sat there in the darkness, he became more calm, and rejoiced in the thought that he was growing stronger, and would, without doubt, soon be fully recovered and able to act. Till then he made up his mind to wait.

When he had arrived at this point he began to think about his position in connection with the rough ne'er-do-wells who were his companions. He shivered involuntarily at the thought of being in such close touch with men of this class; but he softened a little as he dwelt upon the fact that, bad as he was, Pete Burge had behaved bravely, and that he had to thank him for twice-over saving his life. He might have said three times, but he was unaware of the patient attention he had received from the man during the feverish hours produced by his

contusions and wound. But, still, there was a feeling of revulsion which made him shrink from contact with one whom he felt to be the cause of all his sufferings, and he hardened himself against the man more than against the others.

Then, with a sigh of relief, he cast all thoughts of self away, after coming to the conclusion that, as soon as his father realised what had happened, he would never rest till the authorities had had him found and brought back, even if a ship was purposely despatched.

For this thought was very comforting. He had only to wait, he felt, little thinking that the old Captain was lying in peril of his life from the genuine trouble which had come upon him, as he mourned over the loss of the son whom he believed to be dead, and for the recovery of whose body he had offered a heavy reward to the fishermen.

For he said to Solly, "One of these days they will find him cast up on the shore."

It was very dark; the cloudy sky seemed to be hanging low over the heads of those in the boat, as the men rowed on till the overseer made a change in his crew; the four blacks who had been rowing taking the places of those who had been guards and steersman, while the rowers took the muskets in turn.

The fresh crew pulled steadily and well, and the boat glided on along the winding river, whose banks grew more and more wooded until they seemed to be going through a thick forest, whose closely-growing trees formed dense, high walls, above which there was a strip of dark, almost black, sky.

Then another change was made, just when Nic was suffering from a fresh anxiety; for after he had proved to himself, by kneeling in the boat and touching him, that Humpy Dee was alive and regaining consciousness, his companions had suddenly grown very quiet, and the dread had assailed Nic that the man was dead, for he had been left to take his chance as far as the overseer was concerned; and when twice-over the prisoners had begun to trouble themselves about their comrade's state, Nic setting the example by kneeling down to raise Humpy's head, a stern command came from the stern of the boat, and this threat:

"Look here, you fellows; if I hear any more talking or shuffling about there I shall fire."

Nic felt that the man would act up to his threat; but after a time, when a groan came from Humpy, the whispering and movements recommenced in the efforts made to succour the sufferer.

"I don't speak again," roared the overseer; and Nic started and shuddered, but felt fiercely indignant the next moment as he heard the ominous *click! click!* of a pistol-lock from out of the darkness astern.

At last came the order for a fresh change of rowers, and four of the captives went climbing over the thwarts, with their irons clanking and striking against the seats as they took their places, all being men who had been accustomed to the handling of an oar.

Nic took advantage of the noise to sink upon his knees beside Humpy in the bottom of the boat to try if he could not do something for him; he was no longer the hated, brutal ruffian, but a suffering fellow-creature. As Nic felt about in the dark he found that the man had somehow shifted his position and slightly rolled over, so that his face was partly in the water which had collected for want of baling; and doubtless, in his helpless, semi-insensible state, but for Nic's efforts, Humpy Dee's career would after all have been at an end.

It was only a fresh instance of how strangely we are all dependent upon one another, and the way in which enemies perform deeds which they themselves would previously have looked upon as impossible. And without doubt big, brutal Humpy Dee would have stared in wonder, could he have opened his eyes in daylight, to see what took place in the pitch-darkness—to wit, the feeble, suffering young man, whom he had struck down and tried to drown in the Devon salmon-pool, kneeling in the wash-water, making a pillow of his knees for his companion's rough, coarse head.

Still, for hours this was Nic's position, while the boat was rowed by the white slaves along the winding river, until another change was made, the blacks taking the oars, when Pete, being the first of the rowers to come back to his seat, found what had taken place, and insisted upon relieving Nic of his task.

"On'y to think of it, zur," he said; "on'y to think o' your doing o' that, and you so bad!"

Nic said nothing, but had to be helped back to his seat, the position he had occupied having cramped him; and then once

more he sat gazing at the great black wall opposite to him as the blacks sent the boat along, till suddenly, about midnight, there was heard a deep bark from somewhere ashore.

The three dogs, which had been curled up asleep, sprang to their feet and answered in chorus, when another chorus rose from the right and came nearer and nearer. Then the black wall on the same side dropped away, and amidst the baying of the great hounds the boat's speed was slackened, and it was turned into a narrow creek. Here the oars were laid in, and progress was continued for about a hundred yards by a couple of the blacks poling the boat along towards a light which suddenly appeared, the bearer hailing and coming alongside to begin talking to the overseer.

It was dark enough still; but another lanthorn was brought, the prisoners were ordered to step out, and were then marched to a barn-like place, where, as they entered a door, Nic felt the soft rustling of Indian-corn leaves beneath his feet.

"In with you, boys," cried the overseer; and the three dogs, and the others which had saluted them, scampered in. "Watch 'em, boys, and give it to them if they try to get away. There, lie down."

The man held up the lanthorn he had taken as he spoke, and Nic saw that seven of the great hounds settled themselves in a heap of leaves close to the door, while quite a stack was close to where he was standing with his companions.

"There's your bed, my lads," cried the overseer. "You heard what I said. Lie down, all of you, at once. There will be a sentry with a musket outside, and you can guess what his orders are."

The man strode out; the door was banged to, there was the noise of a big bar being thrown across and the rattling of a padlock, followed by the clink of fetters as their wearers lay down in the heap of sweet-smelling corn-stalks and leaves; and for a few moments no one spoke.

Nic had sunk down in the darkness, glad to be in a restful posture, and began to wonder whether Humpy Dee had been carried in by the blacks, for he had been one of the first to leave the boat, and had seen hardly anything by the light of the lanthorns.

"Poor wretch!" he sighed. "I hope he is not dead."

Just then one of the other men said, in the broad Devon burr:

"Zay, lads, bean't they going to give uz zum'at to eat?"

"Brakfus-time," said another. "Zay, Humpy, how is it with ye? Not thuzty, are you? Oughtn't to be, after all that water."

"I'm going to make zumun pay for all this," came in the man's familiar growl. "Why didn't you get hold o' me and pull me in? Zet o' vools. Had your chance; and we might ha' got away."

"Why, it was all your fault," said another. "We was waitin' for you. What did you go and stop zo long under water for?"

"Did I?" said Humpy confusedly.

"Course you did. We was too good mates to go and leave you behind."

There was a heavy bang at the door, as if from the butt of a musket, and the dogs leaped up and began to growl.

"Lie down, boys," cried a thick voice, the words sounding as if spoken through a big keyhole. "An' I say, you chaps, look heah; de massa say you make a row in dah I got to shoot."

"All right, blackie," said one of the prisoners; "don't shoot. Good-night, boys. I'm going to sleep."

Just at that moment Nic started, for there was a snuffling noise close to him, the leaves rustled, and he felt the hot breath of one of the dogs on his face.

But it was a friendly visit, for the great brute turned round two or three times to trample down the dense bed of leaves, and settled itself into a comfortable curve, with its big head upon the poor fellow's chest, making Nic wonder whether it was the dog which had been friendly before.

He risked it: raising his hand, he laid it gently between the animal's soft ears, and there was a low muttering sound that was a big sigh of satisfaction, not a growl; and Nic felt as if the companionship of the dog was pleasant in his terrible loneliness and despair. It was warm and soothing, too, and seemed like the beginning of something hopeful—he knew not what. Then he began to think of home, and a sensation of prayerful thankfulness came over him as he felt that his head was

growing clearer. The next minute all trouble, pain, and weariness were forgotten in a deep and dreamless sleep.

Chapter Twenty Two.

Reaching the Plantation.

A deep growl and a loud burst of barking roused Nic Revel from his deep sleep, free from fever, calm and refreshed, to lie listening to the dogs, wondering what it all meant.

The sun was up, and horizontal rays were streaming in between ill-fitting boards and holes from which knots had fallen consequent upon the shrinking of the wood. There was a feeling of cool freshness in the air, too, that was exhilarating; but for a few moments Nic could not make out where he was.

Then the slight confusion passed away, as he heard the rustling of leaves, and turned to see his companions stirring and yawning, while at the same moment a dog's great head was butted at him as if its owner were a playful sheep, and it then drew back, swinging its tail slowly from side to side.

The next minute the heavy bar was swung down, the great padlock rattled, and the door was drawn open, to let in a flood of light, followed by the two blacks who had fitted on the irons, but who now bore a huge loaf of bread and a pitcher of water; while two more blacks, each shouldering a musket, closed in behind them, to stand as if framed in the doorway.

"Heah, jump up," cried the big smith. "Make has'e; eat your brakfas' fore you go to de boat."

As he spoke he turned an empty barrel with its head upward, banged the loaf down upon it, drew a knife from its sheath in his belt, and counted the prisoners over with the point of the blade. He then drew a few imaginary lines upon the top of the loaf, paused to rub his woolly head with the haft, looking puzzled and as if cutting the loaf into as many pieces as there were prisoners bothered him, and ended by making a dash at his task.

He cut the loaf in half, then divided it into quarters, and went on working hard as he made these eighths, and finally sixteenths.

By this time the top of the barrel was covered.

"Now, den, 'tan' in a row," he cried importantly.

The men scowled, but they were hungry, and obeyed, the black sticking the point of his knife into the chunks he had cut, and handing a piece to each in turn, beginning with Humpy Dee, who did not seem any the worse for his immersion, and ending with Nic.

After this he began again with Humpy, went down the line again, and had begun for the third time when it suddenly struck him that there would not be enough to go round, and he snatched the piece back.

Humpy Dee uttered a furious growl, and made a step forward to recover it; but the big black presented the point of the knife at him and shouted:

"Ah, what dat? You back, sah, 'fore set de dog at you."

Humpy growled like one of the beasts, and resumed his place in the line, and the black went on calmly dividing the remaining pieces, distributed them, and called up the dogs to catch what remained.

The water was then passed round, the blacks went off leaving the sentries in position, and the prisoners sat amongst the Indian-corn leaves, to eat their breakfast ravenously enough.

Before they had finished, the barking of the dogs announced the coming of the overseer, who came in, whip in hand, to run his eye over his prisoners, nodding his satisfaction as he saw that he was not going back minus any of them, and went out again.

Then, as Nic sat eating the remainder of his bread, the entry was darkened a little, and he saw a couple of women peer in—one a middle-aged, comely body, the other a young girl.

There was a pitying expression upon their faces; and, obeying a sudden impulse, Nic stood up to go to speak to them, for it seemed to him that his chance had come. But at his first movement Humpy Dee leaped up, with his fetters clinking, to intercept him, a sour look upon his face, and the frightened women ran away.

"No, you don't," growled Humpy; "not if I knows it, m'lad."

"You, sah—you go back and eat your brakfas', sah," came from the door; and Humpy turned sharply, to see that their guards were standing, each with his musket steadied against a doorpost, taking aim at him and Nic.

"Yah, you old pot and kettle," cried Humpy scornfully; "you couldn't hit a haystack;" but he went back to his place and sat down, Nic giving up with a sigh and following his example.

Half-an-hour after the overseer was back with the dogs, the order was given, and the prisoners marched out, to find the blacks waiting. Nic saw now that there was a roomy log-house, fenced round with a patch of garden; and in a group by the rough pine-wood porch a burly-looking man was standing with the two women; and half-a-dozen black slaves were at the far end of the place, each shouldering a big clumsy hoe, and watching, evidently with the greatest interest, the prisoners on their way to the boat.

In his hasty glance round, Nic could see that the farm was newly won from the wilderness, and encumbered with the stumps of the great trees which had been felled, some to be used as logs, others to be cut up into planks; but the place had a rough beauty of its own, while the wistful glances that fell upon him from the occupants of the porch sent a thrill through his breast, and raised a hope that if ever he came that way he might find help.

But his heart sank again as his eyes wandered to the black labourers, and then to a couple of huge dogs similar to those which followed behind with the overseer; for he knew that he was among slave-owners, and in his despondency he could not help asking himself what chance he would have, an escaped prisoner, if he tried to get away.

He had little time for thought, but he took in the surroundings of the place quickly, noting that the house and out-buildings stood well raised upon a mound, round one side of which the creek they had turned into ran; while through the trees some little distance away there was the river, and across it the forest, rising from the farther bank, not black and forbidding now, but beautiful in the early morning sunshine.

The overseer shouted a hearty good-bye to the people by the porch, and there was a friendly reply, as they marched on to where the boat lay fastened to a stump; the dogs sprang in to retake their places, barking their farewell to the others which trotted down to look on; a big basket of provisions was next put

on board by the smith and his assistant, and then the prisoners were sent forward to their old places, Pete glancing once at Nic, whose eyes were wandering here and there; but Nic avoided the glance.

"Now you, sir," cried the overseer; "don't stand staring about. In with you."

Nic obeyed as soon as there was room, and the overseer took his place astern.

A minute later they were being poled along the creek, which was here and there overarched by the spreading boughs of the trees, and soon after they were out in the main stream, with the blacks rowing steadily in water which seemed to be very slack; the little settlement was seen as a bright spot for a few minutes, and then disappeared behind the trees, which began upon the left bank, and became once more a great green wall to shut out everything else.

And then hour after hour the boat was rowed onward, the river winding far less than on the previous evening, and seeming to form a highroad into the interior, upon which they were the only travellers. It varied little in its width at first, but towards afternoon Nic noted that it was beginning to narrow considerably; but it ran always through forest. As thoughts of escape would intrude, and the poor fellow scanned the banks, he quickly grasped the fact that if an attempt were made it must be by the river, for the forest on either side seemed to be impassable, and how far it ran inland was impossible to say.

A change was made every hour or so, the prisoners taking their turn with the oars; and before the morning was far advanced the overseer ordered Nic into one of the places, watching him intently as he obeyed and fell into stroke at once, rowing hard for a few minutes in the hot sunshine without a murmur. Then all at once the trees on the bank began to sail round, the oar slipped from his hand, and he fell backward into Pete's arms.

When he opened his eyes again he was sitting forward in the bottom of the boat, with one of the blacks supporting him and splashing water from over the side in his face, while the overseer stood looking down grimly.

"You needn't take another turn," he said gruffly; "I wanted to see whether you could do your share."

The rest of the day Nic sat watching their progress, a good deal of it through the gloomy shades of a great swamp, through which the river ran at times almost in twilight, the faint current being marked by the difference in colour and the freedom from the vegetation which marked the waters of the great lagoon spreading away to right and left among the trees, which grew and fell and rotted as far as eye could penetrate.

The vegetation, was rich, but it seemed to be that of a dying forest which had been inundated by the stream, for bank there was none. Huge cypresses stood out at every angle, many having fallen as far as they could, but only to be supported by their fellows. And as the boat went swiftly on in obedience to the sturdily-tugged oars, Nic forgot his troubles in wonder at the strangeness of the scene through which he passed, for it was dreary, horrible, and beautiful all in one. Rotting vegetation supplied the rich, muddy soil from which rose vine and creeper to climb far on high, and then, finding no further support, throw themselves into the air, to hang and swing where the bright sunshine penetrated. Wherever it was shadowy the trees were draped with hanging curtains of moss; while all around Nic looked down vistas of light and shade, whose atmosphere was now golden, now of a score of different delicious greens.

There was something so new and strange about the swamp that it had a fascination for Nic, and he was leaning over the bows, resting his chin upon his hand, when he had his first glance at one of its inhabitants; for, as the boat was being steered past a moss-covered, rotting stump, the gnarled wood suddenly seemed to become animated, a portion of it rising a little and then gliding away with a heavy splash into the water.

Before he could realise what it was, there was another movement just beyond, and this time he made out plainly enough the gaping mouth, prominent eyes, and rugged back of a great alligator, followed by its waving tail, as it dived down from a cluster of tree-roots out of sight.

After this the reptiles became common enough, for the swamp swarmed with them, and Nic realised that it might be a strangely-perilous task to make his way through the forest unless provided with a boat.

The men whispered to themselves as the reptiles scuttled about in their eagerness to escape, and shook their heads; and as Nic turned from observing them to gaze aft he became conscious of the fact that the overseer was watching them with a grim smile

upon his lips, reading their thoughts respecting the dangers of an attempt to escape.

The dogs were evidently familiar with the sight of the reptiles, rarely paying any heed to them save when the boat approached quietly and aroused a sleeper, which in its surprise raised its great jaws menacingly, when one of the dogs would set up the hair about its neck, growl, and make a savage snap at the reptile; and after a while the prisoners grew in turn accustomed to the loathsome-looking creatures.

"But we might seize the boat," thought Nic, "in the case of no help coming;" and he sat there more and more grasping the fact that after all he might be forced to depend upon the aid and companionship of those around him, and be compelled to master the dislike and repulsion which they inspired.

Another stoppage at a woodland farm for the night, and then on again for a fresh day's toil as monotonous as the last.

At the different changes made, the rowers left their oars dripping with perspiration, for the swamp seemed breathless and the heat intense; but towards evening a faint breeze sprang up, and instead of its growing darker there was a lightening in the appearance of the place; the setting sun sent a red glow among the trees, and then they passed out of the forest into a lovely, dreamy, open country, stretching for miles and miles towards where a range of hills ran right across their course, beyond which, pale orange by the fading light, another range of greater height appeared. Soon after they passed the mouth of a clear stream, and at the end of another mile the boat was turned suddenly off to their right into a little river of the clearest water, which ran meandering through a lightly-wooded slope rising towards the hills; and as Nic was gazing at the fairy-like scene, whose atmospheric effects seemed, even in his despondent state, far more beautiful than anything he had ever seen at home, the boat swept round a curve whose banks were thickly set with trees, and once more there was a human habitation in sight, in the shape of a well-built, farm-like house upon a knoll, and the agitation amongst the dogs warned the prisoners that here was their resting-place for the night.

The next minute, as the dogs were barking, the boat was steered close inshore, and the brutes bounded over into the shallow water, to scramble up the bank, and set off as fast as they could go towards the house, from which figures could be seen issuing; and at last, as Nic scanned the signs of cultivation around, the growing crops roughly fenced, and the out-

buildings, the thought struck him that this might be their destination.

While he was wondering whether this were so, the boat was run into a little creek only big enough to let it pass for about a couple of hundred yards before it grounded where a track came down to some posts; and as the boat was secured to one of these the overseer sprang ashore to meet a tall, sun-browned, grey-haired man, whose keen eyes were directed towards the bows of the boat.

"Back again, then, Saunders!" he said sharply. "Well, what sort of a lot do they seem?"

"Rough, but strong," replied the overseer; "all but one young fellow who has been knocked about, but he seems as if he'll soon come round."

"Like so many horses or bullocks," said Nic to himself bitterly, "and I am the one with broken knees."

Chapter Twenty Three.

Nic's Appeal.

"This, then, is my owner," thought Nic, scanning the settler narrowly as he stood apart talking in a quick, decisive manner to the overseer, who seemed to treat him with great respect, while the blacks stood apart waiting for their orders.

These were not long in coming, for the man turned sharply upon them.

"Clear the boat," he said; and the blacks ran to the bows, a couple of them holding the vessel steady while the prisoners stepped clanking out, to stand in a row on the bank, with their new master scanning them sharply.

"Here, Saunders," he said, "why is that boy not in irons?"

"That is the sick one, sir. Weak as a rat."

"Oh!—Here, what's the matter with you, boy?" cried the settler. "No disease, have you?"

"No, sir," said Nic, speaking out firmly, for his time seemed to have come. "I was beaten about the head, and received a wound from a cutlass on the night these men were seized during an outrage, and—"

"That will do. I don't want a sermon," said the settler brutally.

"Nor I to preach one, sir; but I was seized with these men by mistake."

"Ah, yes," said the settler, frowning; "some bad mistakes of this sort are made. That will do."

"But I appeal to you, sir. I was hurried on board a ship while stunned, and I only recovered my senses when I reached this place."

"Then you were a long time without them, my lad; but you are wrong."

"I do not understand you, sir."

"Well, I'll tell you," said the settler, sharply. "You lost your senses before you got into trouble."

"I was only defending my father's property, sir," cried Nic passionately. "I am a gentleman—a gentleman's son."

"Yes, we get a good many over here in the plantation, my lad; they are the biggest scamps sent over to rid the old country of a nuisance; but we do them good with some honest work and make decent men of them."

"But I assure you, sir, I am speaking the truth. I appeal to you, men. Tell this gentleman I was not one of your party."

"Hor, hor," roared Humpy, derisively. "What a sneak you are, Nic Revel. Take your dose like we do—like a man."

"I appeal to you, Pete Burge. Tell this gentleman that I was brought out here by mistake."

"Yes, it was all a mistake, master," cried the man.

Humpy roared with laughter again. "Don't you believe him, master," he cried; "that there Pete Burge is the biggest liar we have in our parts. He'd say anything."

"Men, men!" cried Nic, wildly, to the others; "speak the truth, for Heaven's sake."

"Course we will," cried Humpy quickly. "It's all right, master. Don't you show more favour to one than another. We was all took together after a bit o' poaching and a fight. Youngster there got a crack on the head which knocked him silly, and he's hatched up this here cockamaroo story in his fright at being sent out. Do him good—do all on us good, and we're all glad to ha' got with such a good master; aren't we, lads?"

"That will do," said the settler. "You have got too much grease on your tongue, my man."

"But, sir," cried Nic.

"Silence!"

"You will let me write to my friends?"

"We don't want you to write to us, mate," cried Humpy grinning; "we can't none on us read. You can tell us what you want to say."

"Silence, you, sir," said the settler, sternly; "I keep a cat here, and that man who saw to your irons knows how to use it. Hold your tongue, once for all."

"Oh, all right master; I on'y—"

"Silence!"

Humpy gave his mouth a slap, as if to shut it, and the settler turned to Nic.

"Look here, young man," he said; "I have only your word for your story, and it seems likely enough to be as your fellow-prisoner says, something hatched up from fear. You are sent out here for your good."

"You don't believe me, sir?" cried Nic, wildly.

"Not a word of it," replied the settler. "We get too much of that sort of thing out here. Every man, according to his own account, is as innocent as a lamb. You were sent out of your country, and came in a king's ship. You are assigned to me for a labourer, and if you—and all of you," he cried, turning to the others, "behave well, and work well, you'll find me a good

master. You shall be well fed, have decent quarters and clothes, and though you are slaves I won't make slaves of you, but treat you as well as I do my blacks. Look at them; they're as healthy a set of men as you can see."

The blacks grinned and seemed contented enough.

"That's one side of the case—my part," continued the settler; "now for the other. I've had a deal of experience with such men as you are, and I know how to treat them. If you play any pranks with me, there's the lash. If you attack me I'll shoot you down as I would a panther. If you try to escape: out north there are the mountains where you'll starve; out south and east there is the swamp, where the 'gators will pull you down and eat you, if you are not drowned or stifled in the mud; if you take to the open country those bloodhounds will run you to earth in no time. Do you hear?" he said meaningly, "run you to earth; for when they have done there'll be nothing to do but for some of my blacks to make a hole for you and cover you up. Now, then, you know what's open to you. Your country has cast you out; but we want labour here; and, rough and bad as you are, we take you and make better men of you."

"Thank ye, master," cried Humpy; "that's fair enough, mates."

The settler gave him a look which made the man lower his eyes.

"Now then," said the settler, "I am going to begin, and begin fairly with you.—Samson."

"Yes, massa," cried the big black.

"Take off their irons.—And if you all behave yourselves you'll never have to wear them again."

The basket was at hand; the assistant brought out the little anvil, and the task of filing and then drawing out the rivets began, with the dogs looking on.

"As for you, my lad," said the settler, "I can see you look weak and ill; you can take it easy for a few days till you get up your strength."

"But you will make some inquiries, sir?" pleaded Nic.

"Not one, boy. I know enough. I take the word of the king's people; so say no more."

He turned his back upon his white slave, and it was as if the old confusion of intellect had suddenly come back: Nic's brain swam, black specks danced before his eyes, and he staggered and would have fallen but for Pete Burge's arm, as the man caught him and whispered:

"Hold up, Master Nic; never say die!"

Chapter Twenty Four.

Pete's Appeal.

"Aren't you a bit hard on me, Master Nic?" said Pete, busy at his task in the plantation of hoeing the weeds, which seemed to take root and begin to grow again directly they were cut down.

He did not look up, but spoke with his head bent over his work, conscious as he was that they might be keenly watched.

"I have said nothing harsh to you," said Nic coldly.

"No, zir; but I thought that when you got a bit better, zeeing as we're both in the zame trouble, working together like them niggers, you might ha' got a bit more friendly."

"Friendly!" said Nic bitterly.

"I don't mean reg'lar friendly, but ready to say a word to a man now and then, seeing how he wants to help you."

"You can't help me," said Nic sadly. "I seem to be tied down to this weary life for always, and for no fault of mine—no fault of mine."

"And it's no fault o' mine, Master Nic. You don't believe it, but I couldn't help coming that night; and I did try all I could to keep Humpy Dee from hurtin' you."

"Don't talk about it, please."

"No, zur, I won't; but you're hot and tired. You haven't got your strength up yet, though you are a zight better. Wish I could do all the work for you. Here, I know."

They were hoeing a couple of rows of corn, and Pete was some feet ahead of his companion, who looked at him wonderingly, as, after a quick glance round, he stepped across and back to where Nic was toiling.

"Quick," he said, "you get on to my row and keep moving your hoe and resting till I ketch up."

"But—" began Nic.

"Quick," growled Pete fiercely; and he gave the lagger a sharp thrust with his elbow. "If they zee us talking and moving, old Zaunder's'll come across."

That meant a fierce bullying, as Nic knew, and he hesitated no longer, but stepped into Pete's row.

"I don't like this; it is too full of deceit," said Nic. "You will be blamed for not doing more work."

"Nay; I shan't," replied Pete, "because I shall work harder. We're a-going to do it this way; they won't notice it, and if I keep pulling you up a bit level with me it'll make your work easier."

"But I have no right to let you."

"'Taren't nought to do wi' you; it's for the zake of the old country. When you get stronger and more used to the hoeing you'll do more than I can, p'raps, and help me."

For the prisoners had been compelled to settle down at the plantation; and men who had never been used to regular hard toil, but had lived by fishing and salmon-spearing, and any odd task which offered, now slaved away among the sugar-canecrops or the Indian-corn, the rice cultivation being allotted to the blacks.

The settler had kept his word as to the behaviour to his white servants, treating them with what he considered stern justice; but every effort Nic had made to obtain a hearing failed, the last producing threats which roused the young man's pride, and determined him to fight out the cruel battle as fate seemed to have ordained.

Three months had passed since the boat reached the place that night, and there had been little to chronicle, for the prisoners' life had been most monotonous, embraced as it was in rising early, toiling in the plantation in the hot sunshine all the day,

with the regular halts for meals, and the barn-like shed at night, with the men's roughly-made bunks, a blanket, and a bag of husks of Indian-corn.

The life suited Nic, though, for after the first fortnight he rapidly began to gain strength, and soon after he was sent out with the rest of the men.

There had been no open trouble; the prisoners shared the same building, and their meals were served out to them together; but there was a complete division between them which was kept up whenever possible; and one day out in the field Pete began about it to Nic, who took no heed of either party.

"Zee Humpy Dee look at me, Master Nic?" said Pete.

"Yes."

"Know why, don't you?"

"No."

"You do: I telled you. He zays, as you heered, that I set the zailors on 'em to get 'em brought out here."

Nic said nothing.

"He means to kill me one o' these days. He'll hit me on the head, or pitch me into the river, or zomething; and the others won't interfere."

Nic looked up at the speaker quickly.

"Comes hard on me," continued Pete. "I never done nothing, and they keeps me off, and don't speak; and you don't, Master Nic, zo I zeem all alone like. It makes me feel zometimes as if I must make mates o' the blacks, but I s'pose they wouldn't care for me. Wish I'd got drowned."

Nic raised his head to look in the man's face; but the old trouble rankled in his breast. His heart would not go out to him, fellow-sufferers though they were.

It was so several times over, Pete trying hard to show what goodwill he could under their painful circumstances; but it was not until that day out in the corn-rows, when Pete helped him with his work at a time when the heat was trying his barely-recovered strength, that Nic felt that perhaps there was some

truth in the man's story. At any rate, he was showing himself repentant if guilty, and the prisoner recalled how Pete had nursed him and without doubt had saved his life.

Pete went on hoeing till he had worked level with Nic, and then he worked harder to get as far ahead as he could before slipping back to his own row, for Nic to return to his with once more a good start, and a feeling of gratitude for his companion's kindness, which softened his voice next time he spoke, and delighted Pete, who began talking at once.

"Know where they keep the boat, Master Nic?" he said, as they worked away.

"No. Do you?"

A few hours earlier Nic would have said, "No," and nothing more.

"Think I do," said Pete, brightening up. "I mean to get it out of the niggers zomehow. We never zee it go after they've been out in it. They tie it up at night, and next morning it's always gone."

"Yes," said Nic; "I have noticed that."

"It's that Zamson and old Xerxes who take it away zomewhere in the night, and walk or zwim back."

"Very likely, Pete."

"Yes, Master Nic; that's it; but keep on hoeing. I've laid awake nights thinking about it, for we must have that boat. I don't mean Humpy Dee and his lot when I zay 'we,' because you will go off wi' me if I zee a chance?"

"I—I think not, Pete."

"Master Nic!"

"Well, yes, then; I will."

"Hab, my lad; you zeem to ha' put life into a man. There's zummat to live for now. I've thought and thought till I've felt zick; but that's the on'y way. I could risk running for it; but there's the dogs—the dogs—Pst! look out!"

The warning was needed, for there were steps coming in their direction, and directly after the overseer strode up.

"I thought so," he said; "I've had my eye on you—you scoundrel! Every now and then your hoe has stopped, and I could tell from your manner that you were talking, and wasting your time. Here are you a good six feet behind this weak young fellow. Get on, and catch up to him."

Nic felt stunned, and he turned to speak and exculpate his fellow-slave; but there was such an agonised, imploring look in Pete's eyes that he was silent, and felt compelled to join in the little deception.

"Yes," said the overseer, "a good six feet behind you, my lad, when it ought to be the other way on. Get on, you, sir, get on."

"Yes, zur; zoon pull up, zur."

"Zur and zoon!" cried the overseer. "Bah! what a savage burr you have."

He went on, followed by one of the two dogs which accompanied him, the other hanging back to look up at Nic with its tail wagging slowly, till its absence was noticed and a shrill whistle rang out, which fetched it along with a rush, doubtless caused by recollections of the whip.

"Oh, Pete!" whispered Nic reproachfully.

"It's all right, lad," said the man, laughing merrily. "What a game it was. I didn't mind a bit."

"I did."

"Then don't, Master Nic, zur. I can't have you wear yourself out. We've got to 'scape, my lad, and the boat's the thing; but if you could get t'other two dogs as friendly as that one, we'd make for the woods. But anyhow, you've got to grow as strong as me; we can't do nothing without. Master Nic—"

"Yes."

"If it was the last words I'd got to zay, I did fight for you that night, and it weren't my fault you was took."

"I begin to believe it now, Pete," was the reply.

"Do, zur: do try hard. I aren't a bragger, Master Nic, but it's just truth what I zay. I want to get you back again to the old country; and I can't think o' nought else night or day. If I can

get you off, and come with you, o' course I should like; but if I can't, and I can get you off—there, I'll lie down and die to do it, lad. But look here, we must only trust ourselves. If the other lot, who are making some plan of their own, knew it, they'd tell upon us and spoil us. Master Nic, can't you believe in me!"

Nic was silent for a few moments as he turned to look in the man's eyes.

"Yes," he said at last; "I do believe in you."

"And you'll trust me, zur?"

Again there was a momentary hesitation before Nic answered, "Yes."

"Hoe, Master Nic, hoe," whispered Pete excitedly; "he's been watching us, and he's sent the dogs at us for not being at work."

As proof thereof the two fierce-looking brutes came rushing down one of the rows, open-mouthed, and Pete raised his hoe as if to strike.

"Me first, Master Nic," panted Pete. "I aren't afeared. Let him do what he likes after; I'll kill one or both on 'em before they shall touch you."

At that moment there was a savage growling from the dogs not thirty yards away, and they came rushing at the poor fellows as hard as they could tear.

Chapter Twenty Five.

A Lurking Peril.

In obedience to the order which had despatched them, the two well-trained bloodhounds of the overseer tore on till they were about to bound upon the prisoners, when a sharp, shrill whistle arrested their rush on the instant, and they stopped, growling fiercely, their white teeth menacing, and their eyes red, as with a smouldering fire.

The next moment a different note was blown from a distance, a shrill, chirruping note which made the dogs turn and bark. Then

one of them set off at a steady trot, while the other, as if its duty were done, approached Nic in the most friendly way, with its tail waving from side to side.

The whistle chirruped again, and the dog gave vent to a sharp bark, as much as to say, "All right, I'm coming—" and bounded after its companion.

"Well, we're out of that job, Master Nic. I did wonder at that dog coming at you zo fierce."

"Set at me, Pete," said Nic quietly, "and education was stronger than nature. Keep on working now, and pray let me do my hoeing myself."

Pete grunted, and was silent, as he chopped away with his hoe till a horn was blown up at the house, when the tools were shouldered, and, hot and weary, the two companions trudged back to their barrack, to partake of their evening meal together, Humpy Dee and his party sitting quite aloof, for the feud was stronger than ever.

From that day a change seemed to have come over Nic. It was partly due to the feeling of returning health, but as much to his growing belief in Pete's sincerity, and to the conviction that under the fellow's rough shell there was an earnest desire to serve him and help him to escape from his terrible position.

The despondency to which he had given way seemed cowardly now, and as the days rolled on he worked as one works who is determined to make the best of his position. All the same, though, he joined heart and soul with Pete in the plans made for getting away.

Drawn closer together as they were now, the subject was more and more discussed, and in the long talks they had in whispers of a night, they could not help dwelling on the difficulties they would have to encounter even if they did manage to escape.

"But we will, Master Nic; you zee if we don't. They both talk about shooting us, and that zets me up. I don't want to hurt anybody; but when a man zays he's going to fire at me as if I was a wild beast, I don't feel to mind what I do to him. Don't you be downhearted; we shall do it yet."

"But," said Nic, "it is the getting taken in a ship if we manage to find our way to the coast."

"If we find our way? We've on'y to get that boat. The river will show us the way down to the zea; and as to getting away then, all we've got to do is to try and find a ship that wants men."

"They will not take us, Pete; we shall be looked upon as criminals."

"Not if the skipper wants men," said Pete, laughing softly. "Long as a man can work hard, and is strong, and behaves himself, he won't ask any questions."

The time went on, and there seemed to be no likelihood of any captain asking questions; for in spite of keeping a sharp watch, neither Nic nor Pete could obtain the information they wanted. The boat seemed to disappear in the most mysterious way after being used by the settler or his overseer, and Nic grew more and more puzzled, and said so to his companion.

"Yes, it gets over me zometimes, Master," said Pete; "but one has no chance. You see, there's always people watching you. It aren't as if it were on'y the masters and the dogs, and the niggers who are ready to do anything to please old Zaunders; there's old Humpy Dee and the others. Humpy's always on the lookout to do me a bad turn; and he hates you just as much. He's always thinking we're going to get away, and he means to stop it."

"And this all means," said Nic, with a sigh, "that we must be content to stay as we are."

"Don't mean nothing o' the kind," said Pete shortly. "It's a nice enough place, and there's nothing I should like better than staying here a bit, if we could go about the river and swamp and woods, fishing and shooting, and hunting or trapping; but one gets too much zun on one's back, and when it's always chopping weeds with a hoe, and the weeds grow faster than you can chop, one gets tired of it. Pretty country, Master Nic; most as good as home, only zun is a bit too warm."

Nic sighed.

"That's 'cause you wants to write letters and get 'em sent, Master Nic, I know; but don't you worry 'bout that. You can't send letters here like you do at home, so it aren't no use to worry about what you can't do. Worry 'bout finding the boat, dear lad; that's better than letters."

"I have worried about it," said Nic, "but it is of no use till we get a chance to go and wander about to try and discover where it is kept."

"And that the skipper and old Zaunders won't let us do, you zee," said Pete quietly. "They're a wicked pair, both on 'em. Might let us loose a bit on Zundays; but not they. Zunday and week-days all the zame. They've got us, and they mean to have their penn'orth out on us. Never thought as I should have all my strength turned into sugar for some one else to eat. There, work away; old Humpy's watching us, and he'll go and tell the skipper we're hatching eggs."

Nic smiled, for his companion's good temper and patience were contagious, but he could not repress a sigh from time to time as he thought of home; and the beauty of the country, the waving fields of tasselled Indian-corn or beautiful sugar-cane, with the silver river beyond, the glorious slopes leading up to the distant blue mountains, and the gloomy, green, mysterious attraction of the swampy forest enhancing its attractions to an explorer, did not compensate for the absence of liberty, though Nic was fain to confess that the plantation would have been a glorious place for a few months' visit.

The blacks were not friendly, as Nic soon found; but he attributed it to the stern orders they had received; but now and then one or another made a little advance, by offering, on the sly, fish or flesh in the shape of bird or 'possum which he had caught or trapped during the moonlight nights. For Saunders seemed to pay no heed to the black slaves slipping away of a night on some excursion.

"'Nuff to make a man wish for a kettle o' tar, or a pot o' black paint," said Pete one day. "What for, sir? Just to put on a coat of it, and change the colour of one's skin. They'd treat us better than they do. Makes me wish I was a nigger for a bit, so long as I could wash white when I got away."

"Master Nic," said Pete one night when they were alone in their bunks, "I aren't going to share that bit o' 'possum."

"What bit of 'possum?" asked Nic, as he lay listening to the low murmur arising from where Humpy Dee was talking to his fellow-prisoners, who were all chewing some tobacco-leaf which the former had managed to secrete.

"Why, you know; that bit old Zamson give me, wrapped up in one o' them big leaves."

"Oh yes; I had forgotten. Eat it, then; I don't mind."

"Likely, aren't it?" grumbled Pete. "Good as it smells, for them black fellows do know how to cook a thing brown and make it smell nice. Can't you zee what I mean?"

"No."

"Want it for the dogs. I'm going to slip off after that boat as soon as it's a bit later."

"Impossible, Pete. Don't try; you'll be shot at. There is sure to be one of the blacks outside the door with a musket."

"Let him stop there, then. I aren't going by the door."

"How, then?"

"Climb up here to where I've got a couple o' them split wooden tiles—shingles, as they call 'em—loose."

"But you can't climb up there."

"Can't I? Oh yes, my lad. There's them knot-holes, and I've got some pegs cut as fits into 'em, ready to stand on. I can get up easy enough."

"But the dogs?"

"Well, I smuggled a knife and sharpened it up, and it's tied to my leg in a sheath I made out of a bit o' bamboo cane."

"But it would be madness to fight the poor brutes, and the noise would bring out Saunders with a gun."

"Just what I thought, my lad," said Pete, laughing softly; "so I went on the other tack this month past."

"I don't understand you, Pete."

"I'll tell you, then, my lad," said Pete softly. "I made up my mind to get you back to the old country, and the on'y way to do it seems to be to make friends."

"Make friends?"

"That's it. Way that big dog, Gripper, took to you zet me thinking. If he was zet at you he'd lay hold, 'cause he's been

taught to obey orders. He wouldn't want to, no more than a soldier might want to shoot a man; but if it was orders he'd do it. Well, I've thought a deal about them dogs, and dogs is dogs—eh, Master Nic?"

"Of course," said the young man, smiling to himself.

"And dogs has got zweet tooths, Master Nic; on'y the sugar they likes is a bit o' salt."

"You mean you wanted that piece of roast 'possum to give the dogs if they came at you."

"That's right, Master Nic. If old Zaunders was shouting 'em on, they wouldn't take no notice of the meat; but if he weren't there they'd be friends at once, and eat it. So I'm ready for 'em if they comes after me."

"And you're going to try if you can find where they keep the boat to-night?"

"*Sn-n-n-ork!*" said Pete, pinching his arm, and as the deep, low, snoring went on, Nic grasped the reason.

For there was a faint rustling of the dry corn-leaves, which stopped, and went on again in the utter darkness, while beyond it the low murmur of talking continued.

"The talking kept on to cover Humpy's movements," thought Nic. "He has heard us, and is coming to listen."

Pete snored again, moved uneasily, and began to mutter in a low tone:

"Couldn't throw Humpy Dee?" he said. "Let you see. Better wrastler than him. *Snore—snurrk!*"

The rustling ceased, and then went on again.

"Where's that there moog o' zyder, lads?" muttered Pete in a dull, stupid way. "Where's the huff-cap?"

Then he smacked his lips, and said "Hah!" softly, turned himself over, yawned, and began to snore, keeping it up steadily, while the rustling went on; but it sounded now as if the man who made it was retiring.

Nic listened, with every nerve on the strain, while Pete kept on the snoring, and a minute later he made out clearly enough that Humpy Dee had returned to his companions, and distinctly heard the change in the conversation, as the man whispered the result of his investigation.

Pete's snore was lower now, and sounded as if it would last; but it did not, for the next moment Nic was conscious that his comrade was leaning over him; a pair of lips touched his ear, and a voice whispered:

"He thinks he's clever, but we can be too sharp for him."

"Don't talk any more," whispered Nic softly, "or he'll come back."

"Right," said Pete, and the snoring recommenced. And as Nic lay there in the darkness, thinking over his companion's words, and feeling that it would have been madness to have made any attempt to leave the barrack-like shed, with watchful enemies both within and without, and the certainty in his mind that Humpy Dee's intention was to betray Pete so as to get him flogged for attempting to escape, the snoring went on, with a strange lulling effect. He had toiled hard that day in the burning sunshine, and had lain down after his supper with that pleasant sensation of weariness which comes to the healthy and strong; and he had been feeling a glow of satisfaction and thankfulness for the full recovery of all his faculties, when Pete had spoken as he did. It was not surprising, then, that the heavy breathing of his companion should have the effect it had, and that, just when he was in the midst of pleasant thoughts of the possibility of escape, he should suddenly pass from extreme wakefulness into deep sleep, in which he saw the red cliffs of Devon again, with the sparkling sea, and listened to the soft murmur of the falls low down in thecombe. Back home once more.

Then he opened his eyes with a start.

"I've been asleep," he said to himself, as he listened to Pete's heavy breathing; "not for many minutes, though," he mused; and then he wondered and stared, for he could see the cracks and knot-holes of the wooden building against the grey dawn of the rapidly-coming day.

"Why, I must have been asleep for hours and hours!" he mentally ejaculated.

Proof came the next moment that it must have been eight hours at least, for the dull booming bellow of the great conch shell blown by one of the blacks rang out, and Pete started up in his bunk to stare at Nic and rub his calf softly.

"Had a good night, Pete?" said the lad.

"Tidy," said the man softly; "but one o' the dogs had me by the leg."

"What! Surely you didn't go?"

"Ay, but I did. He let go, though, when he smelt the roast meat. Smelt better than raw."

"Pete!" ejaculated Nic, in his surprise.

"Now then, rouse up, all on you," shouted Humpy Dee, "or they'll be sending in the dogs for us, and the cat for some one else."

"Oh," thought Nic, as a pang of agony shot through him; "that wretch must have been on the watch."

Chapter Twenty Six.

Pete thinks he has found it.

In the morning, as the eternal hoeing went on, Pete found his opportunity for telling of his adventures during the night. Humpy Dee had evidently heard nothing.

"Keep at it, Master Nic," he said; "this here stuff's growed up zo that there's no telling when they're coming on to you. It's all right though, now."

"Tell me, then, quickly. You got out?"

"Zure I did. I meant to, and had a good long night of it."

"And you're sure the dog hasn't hurt you much?"

"Nay, on'y a pinch; I had the meat ready to shove in his face, But there aren't much to tell you."

"I was afraid so. We must be patient, Pete, and live on hope."

"Can't live on hope, master. Hope's on'y the salt as makes the rest o' life tasty. Want zome'at else as well. But don't you be down. We've got to get away, and we'll do it afore we've done."

"Then you found out nothing?"

"Oh yes, I did," said Pete dryly. "I found out that it didn't matter which way I went there weren't what I wanted."

"You mean the boat?"

"That's right, master. I went as far as I could get along the river one way, and it weren't there; and I went as far as I could get t'other way, and it weren't there. Old Zam must get in and paddle it right away zomewheres. There now, if I haven't found it after all!"

"What! Where it is hidden?"

"I believe I have; zeemed to turn it over and find it under this here clod I'm breaking up with the hoe. Wish I'd looked when we was aboard."

"Looked at what?"

"Her bottom. She's got a big bung-hole in her zomewhere, and he must pole her along into a deep part, and take the bung out, and let her fill and zink. Then he zinks the painter with a stone."

"But she wouldn't sink, Pete."

"Oh yes, she would, with ballast enough, sir; and all we've got to do now is to find out where she is."

Nic shook his head sadly, for he was not convinced.

"Don't you do that, my lad; that's not the way to get home. Maybe I'm wrong, but I think I'm right, and I dare zay, if we knowed where to look, she's just close handy zomewhere. Zay, Master Nic, s'pose I get old Zamson down and kneel on his chest, and pull out my knife. I could show my teeth and look savage, and pretend I was going to cut his head off if he didn't tell me. That would make him speak—eh?"

"Yes, to Saunders; and you would be punished, and we should be worse off than ever."

"That's about it, sir. I'm afraid I did no good last night."

Pete chopped and broke clods, and muttered to himself in a way which suggested that he was by no means satisfied with his investigations. Then all at once he said:

"What do you zay to our going quietly down to the water some night, dropping in, and zwimming for it?"

"Into the jaws of the great alligators, Pete?"

"Didn't think o' that. Could hear 'em, too, as I walked along. One whacker went off from just under my feet once. I 'most fell over him, and he roared out like a bull calf. I thought he meant my legs. No, we couldn't do that, Master Nic. We must get hold o' that boat. I'll have another try to-night."

"Better not," said Nic. "Some of the others will hear you."

"And old Humpy be on'y too glad to get me in a row. Well, I mean to have it zomehow."

But Pete did not go upon any nocturnal excursion that night. Nature was too much for him. He dropped asleep, and did not wake till the conch shell sounded its braying note; and Nic rose once more to go to his labour in the fields, asking himself if it was not all a dream.

The next time the settler came that way the young man made an appeal to him for permission to send off a letter to some one in authority; but the angry refusal he received, coupled with a stern order to go on with his work, taught him plainly enough not to place any confidence in obtaining his liberty through his employer, so he tried to move the overseer the next time he came by.

Nic fared worse.

"Look here, my lad," said Saunders; "your country said you were better out of it, and we've taken you, and mean to try and make something decent of you. We're going to do it, too."

"But that was all a mistake, sir, as I told you," pleaded Nic.

"And this is a bigger one. Who is to believe your word? Get on with your work, and if you worry me again with your whining I'll shorten your rations, and keep you on the hardest jobs about the plantation."

"It's of no use, Pete," said Nic as soon as he could speak unobserved; "there is nothing to hope for here. We must escape somehow, or else die in trying."

"That's sense, Master Nic, all but the last part. I don't see any fun in dying for ever so long. I'm going out to-night to find that boat, and if I do, next thing is to zave up some prog and be off. There's one thing to do, though, 'fore we start."

"What's that?"

"Borrow a couple o' guns and some powder and shot."

"Impossible, Pete. No; I think I could manage it."

"How, my lad? It has bothered me."

"There are two ways. Get at the guns one day when Samson is cleaning them; or else creep to the house some hot night, risk all, and climb in by one of the windows. I think in time I shall know whereabouts they are kept."

"Risk getting zeen and shot?"

"We must risk something, Pete," said Nic quietly. "It is for liberty. I should leave it to the last moment, and get them when the boat was all ready; then, if I were heard there would be somewhere to make for, and once afloat we should be safe. But there, we have not found out where the boat is yet."

"And," said Pete thoughtfully, "there's zomething else we haven't took count of."

"What's that?" said Nic eagerly.

"The dogs, my lad; the dogs!"

Chapter Twenty Seven.

A Fight with Morpheus.

Nic had no faith in his companion's notions about the boat lying sunk in the creek or river; but as the time wore on he could suggest no better idea.

Still, he did find out where the guns were kept one day when, in company with a man of Humpy Dee's party, he was ordered up to help in stowing some bales of tobacco-leaf in a kind of store at the back of the low wooden building.

The work was pretty hard, but Nic hardly felt it, for in going to and fro he had to pass an open door which led into the place used by the settler and Saunders for their dining and sitting room. It was a very rough spot, and the furniture was all home-made—that is to say, it was manufactured by the blacks. But Nic hardly heeded its contents after seeing a series of hooks driven into the wall, and upon each pair a musket, with powder-flask and bullet-pouch attached.

He could think of nothing else as he walked away, for these weapons meant a supply of food if he and Pete took to the woods, and that night he communicated the discovery to his companion.

"It ought to be easy to borrow a couple of them," said Pete quietly—"zome night when the two gaffers are asleep. On'y one thing to hinder it, as I zee, for I don't believe they shut themselves up, feeling as they do that we're under lock and key."

"What is to prevent me creeping in and getting them, Pete?"

"Dogs," said the man quietly. "Now, if we was at home I could walk into Plymouth and go to a druggist's shop, and for twopence buy zomething I knows of as would zend those dogs to sleep till we'd done what we wanted; but there aren't no shops in the woods here."

"And we haven't found the boat, Pete."

"And we haven't found the boat, my lad. But here's a little bit of a tool here I've got for you at last. Better one than mine. One of the blacks had been cutting up zome meat with it yesterday, and left it out on the bench—forgetted all about it—they're good ones at forgetting; and zo I scrambled back and got hold of it, sharpened it up at the point, and made a wooden sheath for it, so as you can wear it in your belt under your shirt."

"A knife!" whispered Nic excitedly as Pete thrust the weapon into his hand. "No; I don't want to shed blood."

"I didn't say it was to kill men with, did I? S'pose one of them dogs had you by the throat, wouldn't it be useful then? or to kill

a deer out in the woods? or skin a 'possum? Might even be useful to stick into a 'gator's throat. Better take it, master."

Nic's hand closed upon the handle of the keen blade, and he transferred it to his belt; when, as the hard sheath pressed against his side, he felt that, after all, it was one step towards liberty.

The next morning Pete told him that he had had another good hunt by the river-side, going as far as he dared, but without result.

"And 'twix' you and me, Master Nic, I suppose it's being a bit of a coward, but I dursen't go no more. I aren't afraid o' things you can see; but when you're down by the water o' nights listening to the strange birds making queer noises, and the big bats whuzzing round you, to say nothing of the 'gators walloping about at the edge, and other gashly things zeeming to be lying wait for you, it's a bit too much for me."

"It must be very nervous work, Pete."

"Last night about settled me that we must go right up-country or through the woods, for I trod on a big snake, and felt it twissen round my leg. Ugh! I don't mind a conger, because, even if he bites you, it's on'y a bite, and it gets well; but a snake! Why, they tell me—leastwise one of the blacks did—as a bite from one of the rattlesnakes'll finish you off in 'bout an hour."

"But you were not bitten?"

"S'pose not, and I've been thinking since I must ha' trod on the gashly thing's head. Anyhow it did scare me, and I mean to chop every one I zee while I'm hoeing. I have killed four since we've been here."

"You must not try it again, Pete," said Nic.

"Then we shall have to take to the woods, master, for I don't zee any chance o' getting the boat."

That day, while the two prisoners were hoeing together, the settler came round, stood watching them for a time, and then came nearer and examined their work, saw nothing to complain of, but still being dissatisfied, he turned upon Pete.

"Here, you get chattering too much with this lad," he cried; "be off across to the long corn-field behind the house and join that gang. Work with them, and send black Jupe here to take your place."

"Yes, master," said Pete quietly; and as he shouldered his hoe and the settler walked away, he made an offer at him with the hoe, when one of the dogs growled savagely.

Suspicious of danger, the settler turned sharply, to see Pete slouching away with his eyes on the ground; so, after an angry word or two at the dog, the master went on again, leaving Nic hoeing away, thinking how dreary the days would pass if he were to have no better companionship than that of the black.

Half-an-hour passed before the slave came slowly along the row Nic was hoeing—for the waving growth completely shut them from sight—and upon reaching his fellow-prisoner's side he made a few scrapes with his hoe and then stopped, with his black face shining as he showed his teeth.

"You had better go on with your work," said Nic quietly; "the master will be back."

"Not a day, sah," said the black. "Him going get boat and go up ribber 'long o' Massa Saunder."

Nic looked at the man sharply as he uttered the word *boat*. Wouldn't it be possible to hear from him where the boat was kept?

"Berry hot. Take four boy row de boat, and tell Sam and Zerks load de gun and shoot ebbery white body who done work."

"Ah!" said Nic.

"Dat so, sah," said the man, laughing. "No shoot black fellow."

He said no more, but went on chopping away in the hot sunshine far faster than Nic could manage, and the intense heat did not seem to affect him. For it was so hot that the prisoner felt exhausted, early as it was in the day, the tall growth around keeping off the breeze.

But he worked away, with the perspiration streaming down his face, thinking what an opportunity this would be for taking to the woods or the open country, but with his heart sinking as he dwelt upon the possibility of Humpy Dee and the others fighting

against such a plan from pure malice. And besides, Pete was not there to discuss the matter. There were the armed blacks, too, and the dogs.

Nic went to the end of his row, turned, and worked away back, forgetful of his black companion, till he was half-way along the return row, when a peculiar sound startled him, and stepping aside among the canes, his heart gave a big throb, for the black seemed to have fallen from exhaustion. The next minute he smiled, for he realised that the man was fast asleep.

And how hot it was! Nic's throat was dry, his tongue parched, while only some three hundred yards from where he toiled there was the green band of cane and reed jungle, and just beyond that the bright, cool waters of the river.

Oh, if he could only be where he could lie down and take one long, deep draught!

The thought of it increased his thirst.

Well, why not? The black had shown him that there was no danger. Their tyrants had started in the boat by now, or the idle rascal would not have lain down so coolly to sleep, and this terrible thirst—

"Oh, I must go and have a drink," muttered Nic wearily; and then, laying down his hoe, he walked swiftly to the end of the row, turned at right angles along by the ditch which divided the field from the next field, and, satisfied that he could not be seen from the house, kept on and on, startled more than once by the rustle of a gliding snake, till the narrow patch of jungle was reached, and he plunged into it, to force his way along to the edge of the river.

The reeds and dense water-growth ended suddenly, and he was about to peer out, up and down, to make sure that he was not seen, thinking the while of how easy escape seemed, when he drew back and stood watching with starting eyes.

But it was not at the alligator six feet long which lay between him and the gliding river, nor yet at that other, a dozen yards away, sunning itself at the surface of the water; but at the black woolly head of a swimmer nearly at the other side, making easily and well for the mouth of an overhung creek nearly opposite to where Nic crouched, and quite regardless of the dangerous reptiles which might be near.

The feeling of thirst died out as Nic watched, seeing that there was a way of escape after all by the river; for if that man dared trust himself to swim in open daylight to the other side, surely he and Pete might venture, even if the place did swarm with reptiles?

Nic's heart beat with a strange feeling of satisfaction. Here, then, was one of his unfortunate companions taking advantage of the master's absence to escape. Why was not Pete there to join him, and they might all get away together?

In another minute Nic would have been on his way back to try and get speech with Pete, and tell him what he had seen. He might, he thought, elude Samson's watchfulness, when, to his astonishment, the man reached the farther shore, stepped out, and shook himself, when Nic felt that he must be dreaming, for it was Samson himself.

The next minute Nic saw him plunge into the thick growth overhanging the narrow creek and disappear.

"Left his musket behind because he felt doubtful about getting it across," thought Nic, and once more he was about to hurry back, when a strange rustling sound caught his ear, followed by the rattle as of a pole; and directly after the mystery of the boat's hiding-place was laid bare, for it glided out from among the waving canes, and there was Samson standing upright, dipping the pole first on one side, then on the other, sending the boat across as it glided down with the stream, passed the watcher, and evidently was being directed for the other creek.

"Poor old Pete, how glad he'll be!" thought Nic. "That's it, plain enough; kept over there because they think no one would dare to swim across; but we dare."

"Dare we?" said Nic to himself the next minute, as he saw an unusually large alligator make a swirl in the water and dart by; and he shuddered as the thought occurred to him that, though the reptiles might not touch the blacks, with a white man it might mean something very different.

"Ugh! you little beast," he muttered, as there was a rustle in the moist patch of jungle, and he caught sight of the loathsome blunt muzzle of what looked like a monstrous eel staring hard at him, not a couple of yards distant.

A quick movement sent the reptile scuffling away; then there was a splash, and forgetful entirely of his thirst, Nic hurried

back, feeling a lingering doubt as to whether the settler or his overseer might not have been to the field during his absence, as they were certainly not gone.

But upon reaching the place where he had left his hoe, there it lay with the handle too hot to hold, and the slave close at hand, shining and happy, fast asleep, with his mouth open, and the red lips attracting the flies, as if it were some huge ugly red blossom from which they might sip.

That day seemed as if it would never come to an end. But at sunset the conch shell was blown, and the black started up, just as Nic straightened his weary back, and came slowly towards him down the row he had hoed.

"Um tink um been fass 'sleep, sah," said the black, grinning. "You tell Mass' Saunder? No, you not tell um, and me shut de eye nex' time you go 'sleep."

"I shan't tell tales," said Nic good-humouredly. "But I say, do you ever think about running away?"

"Run away? What for? No use run away. Set dogs to catch you 'gain. An' if dogs not catch um, where run to? Plantations all alike."

"To you," thought Nic. "Yes; where could he run to—back to Africa? What then? Only to be caught and sold again. Poor wretch! Worse off than I. There is no pleasant Devon for him to reach, as we must and will reach it some day. Yes, there are slaves far worse off than I. What can the dear old dad have thought when he found me gone? There is only one answer to that," said Nic, with a weary sigh—"that I was drowned in the pool struggle and swept out to sea."

The next minute Pete came into sight, and their eyes met, Nic giving the man so long and intent a look that he did not see Humpy Dee watching him, only that Pete's face worked a little, as if he grasped the fact that his companion had some news to impart.

But they had no chance of communicating then, for Samson and Xerxes were ready to count them as they went up to their shed; the dogs looking on and trotting about busily, as if helping two black shepherds by rounding up their flock.

It was hard work to eat that night, and the evening meal seemed more than ever to resemble a mash prepared for fattening cattle such as they seemed to be.

But Nic felt that food meant strength when the time for escaping came, and he forced himself to devour his portion as if ravenously.

The night soon came there, and they were locked up once more, Nic eagerly waiting for the chance to tell all he knew.

As he lay in his bunk listening, it was evident, from the low, guarded tone in which their companions talked, that they were in ignorance of the fact that their masters were absent, and all was very still outside, till one of the men spoke out angrily. Then a bang on the door from the butt of a musket, followed by a burst of deep-toned barking, told plainly enough that proper precautions were taken, Samson's voice coming loudly and hoarsely with an order to keep quiet and lie down before he had to shoot.

"But there's light ahead," thought Nic; and he waited till he thought he could communicate his news to Pete; but, to his disgust, the deep, low breathing close at hand told that he was asleep.

"Worn out with his weary toil last night," thought Nic. "Well, I'll keep watch to-night until he wakes, and tell him then."

But hour after hour went sluggishly by, with the watcher trying to think out the plan by which they could escape in the easiest way.

In spite of the excitement produced by the knowledge that a door was open by which they could get away, there was a hindrance to his thoughts coming clearly. That long day's toil in the burning sun made his plans run together till they were in a strange confusion; and at last he was swimming the river to reach the boat, when a dozen of the reptiles which haunted the water seemed to be tugging at him to drag him down, barking fiercely the while. Then he started up, to find that he had been fast asleep, and that the dogs were barking loudly because of their master's return.

"What's the row about?" Nic heard Humpy Dee growl.

"Then I was right," said another of the men. "The gaffers have been off somewhere, and have just come back. I thought so,

because neither of them showed up in the fields after quite early."

"Why didn't you tell me?" growled Humpy; and he whispered to his companions very earnestly.

Just then the voices of the settler and the overseer were heard talking to Samson; the dogs came smelling about the door, and the sentry spoke loudly to them to get away. Then by degrees all grew silent again, and a rustling sound told Nic that Pete was moving in his bunk.

"Couldn't help it, lad," he whispered; "I was zo worn out, I went off fast. You've got zome'at to tell me?"

"Yes."

"I knowed it; but if I'd had to save my life I couldn't ha' kep' my eyes open. What is it?"

Nic told him, whispering earnestly in his excitement.

"What a vool—what a vool!" whispered Pete. "On'y to think o' me never thinking o' that. Then it's all right, Master Nic. We can just get together enough prog to last us, borrow the guns, pick out the night that zuits us, and then go quietly off."

"But would you dare to swim across the river—the alligators?"

"Yes," said Pete; "if they was twice as big; and if they touch me—well, they'll find out what an edge and point I've given my knife. It's all right, Master Nic, and I'm glad it's you as found out the way."

"Hist!" whispered Nic, laying a hand on the man's mouth.

For there was a rustling not far from where they lay; and Nic felt as if a hand were catching at his throat, for the thought came to thrill him through and through that Humpy Dee had crept nearer to hear what, in their eager excitement, they had said; and if he had heard—

Pete put it this way:

"If he knows, the game's at an end."

Nic slept little more that night; not that he and Pete talked again about their plans, but because his brain was full of the momentous question:

Had their treacherous companion heard?

Chapter Twenty Eight.

The Time at last.

It was nervous work during the next few days, neither Nic nor Pete daring to take any step towards making their escape, for the feeling was strong upon both that they were in their enemy's hands, and that he was only waiting his time before betraying them to the overseer.

"That's his way, Master Nic, and it always was. Once he had a grudge agen a man he'd never forgive him," said Pete one night, "and he'd wait his chance to serve him out. I never liked Humpy, and he never liked me; zo, after all, it was six o' one and half-a-dozen o' the other."

"I can't help thinking that we are worrying ourselves about nothing, Pete," replied Nic. "It's a case of the guilty conscience needing no accuser."

"That it aren't, sir," said the man sturdily. "I aren't going to believe you've got any guilty conscience, and there aren't nothing worse on mine than a bit o' zalmon."

Nic smiled in the darkness, and Pete went on:

"Well, if you think like that, Master Nic, let's risk it. Old Humpy's cunning enough, but p'raps two heads'll be better than one, and we can beat him. What do you zay to trying, then?"

"Anything is better than this terrible suspense, Pete," said Nic. "I did manage to bear my fate before, but the thought now of that boat lying ready to carry us down the river is too much for me, and there are moments when I feel as if I must say to you, 'Come on; let's run down to the river and dash in, risking everything.'"

"What! and them zee us go, Master Nic?"

"Yes; I am getting desperate with waiting."

"Wouldn't do, my lad. They'd chivvy us, them and the blacks and Humpy and t'others. Why, bless you, nothing old Humpy would like better."

"I'm afraid so."

"That's it, zir, whether you're 'fraid or whether you bean't. And s'posing we got the boat, what then, zir? Them seeing us and going along by the bank shooting at us."

"We might lie down, Pete."

"Yes; and they'd send in half-a-dozen niggers to zwim to the boat and bring it ashore. What do you say to that, zir?"

"That I'm half-mad to propose such a thing," replied Nic.

"Talk lower, zir. I can't hear old Humpy; but let's be on the lookout."

"Better give up all thought of getting away," said Nic despondently.

"Bah! Never zay die, Master Nic. Why, there's the old place at home seeming to hold out its finger to us, beckoning-like, and zaying 'Come,' and once I do get back, you'll never ketch me meddling with no one's zalmon again. But look here, zir, we thought it all out before, and I don't see as we can better it."

"I feel hopeless, Pete."

"And I feel as if I've got 'nough o' that stuff in me for both. Wish we could be hoeing together again, so as we could talk it over."

"I wish so too, Pete."

"It aren't half so pleasant hoeing along with the blacks as it is with you, zir."

"Thank you, Pete," said Nic, smiling to himself.

"I aren't got nought agen 'em. They can't help having black skins and them thick lips, and they're wonderful good-tempered. Just big children, that's what they are. Fancy a man being a zlave and ready to zing and dance 'cause the moon

zhines, ready to go out hunting the coons and 'possums as if there was nothing the matter."

"It's their nature to be light-hearted," said Nic.

"Light-hearted, zir? Why, there's one o' the gang along with me as allus seems as if you were tickling him. Only to-day he drops hisself down and rolls about in the hot sun, and does nothing but laugh, just because he's happy. Why, I couldn't laugh now if I tried."

"Wait, Pete; perhaps you may again some day."

"I want to laugh to-morrow night, zir."

"What?"

"When we've got a couple o' guns aboard that boat, and we're going down the river," whispered Pete excitedly. "I can laugh then."

"We couldn't do it, Pete."

"We could, zir, if we zaid we would."

"There is the risk of that man watching us and telling."

"He'd better!" growled Pete. "Look here, zir; let's have no more shilly-shallying. Say you'll go to-morrow night, and risk it."

"Why not wait for a good opportunity?"

"'Cause if we do it mayn't never come."

"But food—provisions?" said Nic, whose heart was beginning to throb with excitement.

"Eat all we can to-morrow, and chance what we can get in the woods, or go without a bit. I'd starve two days for the sake of getting away. Will you risk it, zir?"

For answer Nic stretched out his hand and grasped Pete's, having his own half-crushed in return.

"That settles it, then," whispered Pete hoarsely. "Zave a bit of bread-cake if you can. May come in useful. To-morrow night, then."

"To-morrow night."

"Are you two going to keep on talking till to-morrow morning?" growled a deep voice. "Zum on us want a bit o' sleep. Look here, mates; I'm going to speak to the gaffer to-morrow, to ax if them two chatterin' old women can't be put somewheres else."

Nic turned cold, and Pete uttered a deep sigh, for if this were done they would, he knew, have to begin making their plans again.

But hope cheered them both as the next day dawned and passed on without incident. Humpy Dee's was evidently only an empty threat, and as evening drew on Nic's excitement increased, and with it came a sensation of strength such as he had not enjoyed for months.

It was as if his companion had endowed him with a portion of his own elastic temperament, and success was going to attend their efforts. All the weary despondency had passed away, and in imagination Nic saw the boat floating down the river towards the sea, where, hope whispered, it must be very easy to find some British ship whose captain would be ready to listen to their unhappy story, and let them hide on board till he set sail, and then let them work their passage home. "For," argued Nic now in his excitement, "no Englishman could be so hardhearted as to refuse help to a white slave."

He saw nothing of Pete after they had started for their day's work, their duties taking them to different parts of the plantation; but that was no more than he expected, and he toiled away with his hoe, telling himself that this was the last time he would handle it, for they would—they must—escape; and he wondered now that he could have hesitated so long, and have let the notion that Humpy Dee was quietly trying to undermine them act like a bugbear.

One thing was difficult, though, and that was to eat heartily in readiness for what might be a long fast. Nic ate all he could force down, however, and hid away the rest. But how long that hot day seemed, before the darkness closed in and the strange sounds began to rise from the woods and river!

Never had all these sounded so loudly before; and when at last Nic lay down in his rustling bunk, and the place had been locked and the black sentry placed at the door, it seemed to the listener as if the great goat-suckers were whirring about just

outside, and the bull-frogs had come in a body to the very edge of the woods and up the ditches of the plantation to croak.

Humpy Dee and his companions were talking together; the black sentry yawned, and began to hum an air to himself; and soon after the voices of the settler and the overseer passed, discussing some plan in connection with the crops; but Nic did not hear either of the dogs bark, neither did the one which had shown friendliness towards him come snuffling about the entrance of the low shed.

"Why doesn't Pete say something?" thought Nic, who began to wonder at the silence of his companion, not a word having passed since they met at the rough supper; and now, for the first time that day, Nic's heart sank a little, for it seemed to him that his fellow-plotter had shrunk from the risks they would have to encounter—risks which might mean being shot at, worried by the dogs, dragged down by the alligators to a horrible death, perhaps fever and starvation in the swamp, or being drowned at sea, if they reached the river's mouth, and were swept away by one of the fierce currents along the shore.

It meant waiting two hours at least before they could begin their attempt; but still Nic wanted to get rid of the oppression which troubled him, and to feel that they really were going to make their escape; but the murmuring of their companions' voices went on, and still Pete made no sign.

At last Nic could contain himself no longer. He was all eagerness now; and, if they were not going to make the attempt, he wanted to know the worst. He spoke in a whisper:

"Pete, Pete!"

"Phew! how hot—how hot!" muttered the man.

"Pete!" whispered Nic again.

"I wish you wouldn't keep on talking," said Pete loudly. "You know how it set them grumbling last night."

Nic drew a deep breath through his teeth, as he lay there in the hot, oppressive darkness. They were not going, then. It was the way with a man of Pete's class to pick a quarrel upon some other subject when he wanted to find an excuse and back out of an arrangement.

"Ay, you had a narrow escape on it," said one of the men surlily. "Old Humpy was pretty nigh going to the gaffer to-day."

"It's all over," thought Nic, as a feeling of bitterness ran through him. Only four-and-twenty hours earlier he had been ready to give up and accept his position. Then Pete had touched the right chord in his nature, and roused him up to a readiness to run any risk, and make a brave dash for liberty; while now the man seemed to have shrunk back into his shell, and to be completely giving up just when the call was about to be made upon his energies.

At another time Nic might have argued differently; but, strung up as he had been, his companion's surly indifference was crushing, and it seemed that the wild, exciting adventures of the night were to give place to a cowardly, sordid sleep.

"If anything big is to be done, one must depend upon one's-self," thought Nic at last; and, angry with the whole world, bitter at his own helplessness, as he felt how mad it would be to attempt the venture alone, he turned over in his bunk, throwing out one hand in the movement, and it came in contact with Pete's, to be gripped fast.

In an instant the blood was dancing through his veins, and a choking sensation as of impending suffocation troubled him; the arteries in his temples beat painfully, and he lay breathing hard.

For it was to be after all, and this conduct was his companion's way of showing him that it was better to lie in silence, waiting till the time arrived for commencing their task.

Nic lay there listening to the low murmur of his fellow-prisoners' voices and the chorus of strange sounds from the forest and river; and in the stillness of the night, every now and then, a faint splash came plainly to where he lay, sending a thrill through him, as he thought that, if all went well, before very long he might be swimming across the river, running the gauntlet of the horrible-looking reptiles, and his left hand stole down to his belt to grasp the handle of the sharpened knife, while he wondered whether the skin of the alligators would be horny or tough enough to turn the point.

How long, how long it seemed before all was perfectly still in the long, low shed, and not a sound could be heard outside but the faint humming noise made by the black sentry!

Then all at once there were steps.

Some one had come up, and in a low whisper Nic heard the words:

"All right?"

"Yes, massa."

Then the steps passed away again, and Pete gripped Nic's hand as he lay straining his hearing to try and ascertain whether the overseer had entered the house; but the barking or croaking of reptiles was the only sound.

Another hour must have passed, and then Nic's blood rushed through his veins, for a hand touched his again lightly, and seemed to seek for the other. Directly after he felt a hot breath upon his face, and lips to his ear, uttering the one word:

"Come!"

Chapter Twenty Nine.

For Life and Liberty.

Before Nic Revel's mental sight the difficulties rose like a great black rock, but he did not shrink. He rose softly from his bunk, striving hard to keep the corn-stalks from crackling, and felt Pete as the man took a couple of steps from his sleeping-place and stood with his face to the back of the shed.

Then, in the midst of a very faint rustling, Nic knew that his companion had thrust a couple of pegs into the knot-holes in the stout planks, and raised himself by hand and foot till he could softly draw the wooden shingles of the roof aside, and the cool, moist air of the night came down. Then for a moment or two Nic saw a bright star, which was blotted out by something dark as the faint rustling continued.

Nic turned to listen, but all was well within the shed. He could hear the deep breathing of sleepers, and the low humming song of the sentry outside the door.

"How long will it be?" thought Nic, who was trembling with excitement; but the suspense was soon over. All at once there was a dull sound, such as might be made by two bare feet

alighting on the earth outside, and he knew that his turn had come.

He was lightly enough clothed, merely in short-sleeved, striped cotton shirt, and breeches which did not reach the knee, and his feet were bare, so that there was nothing to hinder his efforts as he reached up till he could place one foot upon the first peg. Then, seeking for the other, he seized it in his hand, and drew himself into a standing position upon the first, reached up to the rafters, drew himself farther up till he could rest his foot on the second peg and pass his head and shoulders through the hole in the roof; then, resting a hand on either side, he drew his legs through, turned and lowered himself down, and dropped upon the ground almost without a sound.

It was intensely dark, but every step was familiar enough, and there was no need for words: their plans had been too well made. But as they moved off towards the house, one thought was in both minds as presenting the greatest obstacle they had to dread:

Where were the dogs? If loose, and their approach were heard, the great brutes would set up a fierce baying directly, preliminary to a savage attack; and then—

They neither of them cared to reckon more in advance than that, and went softly on, to receive proof directly that the dogs were not loose, for there came from the back of the house the rattle of a chain being drawn over wood, followed by a low, muttering growl, as if one of the animals was uneasy.

This ceased directly; and, treading cautiously, Nic went straight up to the front of the building, feeling as if, at any moment, he might see the flash of a musket and hear its roar.

But the place was dark and still, and the croaking and other sounds which came in chorus were quite loud enough to drown their light footsteps as they approached.

The door was closed, but the two long, low windows in the veranda proved to be open; and, as Nic approached the one upon his right and listened, he could distinctly hear the heavy breathing of a sleeper. He drew cautiously back, to come in contact with Pete, who was taken by surprise at the sudden movement made.

Then they stood with hearts thumping against their ribs, feeling certain that they must have been heard; but not a sound

followed. After waiting nearly a minute, a fresh movement was made, Nic stepping softly to the window on his left, the perspiration streaming down his face, for the heat was intense.

He listened here, with Pete close behind, but all was still, the window wide open to admit the air; and he knew that all he had to do was to pass softly in, take down a couple of the guns, passing one out at a time through the window to Pete, beat a retreat, and then all would be as easy as possible. It was only cool, quiet action—that was all; but Nic for a time could not move, only stand there, breathing heavily, in the full expectation of hearing his companion say something to urge him on.

Pete did not stir: he felt that he must trust to his companion's common-sense, and leave him to act as was best.

Then the power to act seemed to come, and Nic softly grasped the window-sill, passed one leg in, then the other, and stood upon the bare floor, fully expecting to hear a bullet whiz past his head, even if it did not strike.

But he could hear nothing; the house might have been unoccupied; and, drawing a deep breath, he acted quickly now, turned to his left, raised his hands, and pressed forward till they touched one of the weapons hanging upon the wall.

A sudden feeling of elation now came over him, for it all seemed to be so astonishingly easy, as he stepped softly to the window to pass out a musket with its flask and pouch, feeling it taken from his hand directly.

The next minute he was in front of the other pieces, and took down a second musket, felt that the flask and pouch were attached to it, and, with his pulses hard at work, he was about to make for the window when every drop of blood in his veins seemed to stand still. For there was a sharp, angry oath, a quick start, and the overseer, who had been sleeping upon a rough couch, rose to a sitting position.

It was too dark for Nic to make out anything more than a shadowy figure within ten feet of him; and he stood as if petrified, holding the musket, meaning to use it as a club at the first attack; one which seemed to be strangely deferred, for the figure sat as if staring at him in astonishment.

How long this pause lasted it is impossible to say, but to the intruder it seemed like minutes before he heard a faint rustling movement as if the overseer was about to lie down again.

"He can't see me," thought Nic. "It is too dark."

Then his heart seemed to stand still again, as the horrible thought occurred that the rustling meant getting something out of a pocket, and that something must be a pistol.

Instinct taught the listener that to save his life he must spring at his enemy before he could take aim, and, nerving himself for a leap forward to dash the musket he held upon the man's face, he was almost in the act of bounding across the room when there was a low gurgling sound, and his nerves and muscles relaxed, for he realised the fact—the overseer had awoke suddenly from some nightmare-like dream, and it was no pistol he had taken out, but a flask of spirits.

It was plain enough now—the gurgling of the flask, the smack of the lips in the darkness, and the long, satisfied breath taken, before the bottle was replaced and its owner sank back upon his couch.

In another minute the breathing had grown deeper and sounded stertorous; and, without pausing longer, Nic stepped to the window, handed out the gun, and felt it taken quickly from his hands.

Just then there was a faint muttering which almost paralysed Nic, who turned to meet an attack; but none came, and in another instant or two he had slipped out of the window and was following Pete, who had handed back one gun, with the warning to beware of the dogs.

Pete's stooping figure was just visible as Nic followed, him in silence till they were about a hundred yards away, making for the spot where the boat was hidden, when one of the dogs barked loudly.

"Mustn't stop to load," whispered Pete. "Let's get to the water, and then they can't take up the scent."

They hurried on, listening the while; but the dog quieted down again; and with his spirits rising, Nic closed up alongside of his companion.

"That was a near touch, master," whispered Pete. "I waited ready to jump in and help you, for I somehow thought it was too dark in there for him to see you, and you hadn't made any noise. Lucky for him he lay down again."

Nic made no reply, but he thought a great deal; and no more was said till they had crossed a couple of the great fields and knew by the sounds they heard that they must be close to the long, low band of reedy growth which ran by the river-side.

"You lead now, my lad," whispered Pete. "Get as nigh as you can to where you think the creek is on the other side."

"It is so dark," whispered Nic; "but I think we are right."

He went to the front, assailed by a horrible doubt now that he had taken the wrong way, and was some distance farther up the river; but, as he bent down to part the low growth, to peer through over the dark water, there was a scuffle and a splash, telling of some reptile taking flight, and he shrank back.

But he hardly heeded it, for he had dimly made out a solitary tree across the river, some eighty or a hundred yards away, which he had marked down for bearings.

"This is the place, Pete," he whispered. "If you stand here and look across, the creek is a little way up to the right."

"That is good, my lad; I was beginning to be feared that we should have to wait for daylight, and be missed. Now then, take my gun and the tackle, and while I'm gone you load both on 'em."

"While you are gone?" whispered Nic excitedly. "You are not going; I know the way, and I'll fetch the boat."

"That you don't, Master Nic," said the man sturdily. "That there water's full o' them great brutes, and one of 'em might pull you down."

"I know it is; and one of them might pull you down."

"He'd be sorry for it if he did, for I'd soon send my knife through his carcass. It's my job, zir, and I'm going."

"I tell you I know just where it is, and I'm going to fetch it."

"That you aren't, zir. I won't have you risk it."

"Then we'll swim the river together, Pete."

"And what about the guns?"

"Leave them on the bank, and come back and fetch them."

"Never find 'em again in the darkness and hurry, my lad. Now, do be zensible."

"I'm master, and I order you to stay."

"Which you aren't master, zir, for we're both zlaves, and if you talk so loud you'll be bringing down the dogs and I'm off."

Almost before Nic could realise it, Pete had slipped across the narrow space, lowered himself into the water, and swum away, leaving his companion horrified at the sounds he heard. For directly after the man had struck out there was a tremendous wallowing splash, which Nic felt certain had been caused by some monstrous reptile; and he crouched there grasping the guns, with a chilly perspiration breaking out over his brow.

It was some minutes before he thought of the loading, and when he did he could not follow out his instructions for listening and staring across the dark, gliding water, which was full of life, startling him with the belief that Pete had been attacked when some louder splash than usual came from the direction the man had taken. Then the horrible thought came that the poor fellow had been seized the moment he plunged in, and that that loud wallowing noise was when he was dragged underneath. For, though he listened so hard, there was nothing to prove that his comrade was still swimming across the river; and his heart sank at the thought of what would be a most horrible death.

Everything served to depress him more as he crouched there in the enforced inaction; he could hear rustlings in the low water-growth as of reptiles creeping along, the splashes in the river, and all about him the croaking, hooting, and barking of the nocturnal creatures which made the place their home; while, as if these were not sufficient, there was the dread of pursuit, with their enemies hounding on the savage dogs, which might spring upon him at any moment.

"Not without giving notice, though," he said to himself. "What a nervous coward all this has made me! Why, the hounds would begin to bay as soon as they took up the scent."

He listened again; but all was still save a splash or two, and he bitterly repented that they had not thought of some signal—a whistle or the like—to give warning that the river had been successfully crossed.

"He would do it," thought Nic, trying to be firm. "He is a splendid swimmer. Why, it was wonderful what I believe he did when he tried to save me—in irons, too."

Nic paused for a few moments longer to listen to the splashing which went on; and then, recalling once more his companion's words, he prepared to load the muskets.

But the first he tried proved to be loaded, and, on replacing the ramrod and opening the pan, he found the priming all right. The next proved to be in the same condition; and, once more laying the pieces down, he crouched with his ear near the water to listen to the lapping and splashing which went on. But there was nothing that he could interpret to mean the movement of an oar or pole on a boat, and his heart began to sink again lower and lower, till wild thoughts arose about his companion's fate.

He would not give harbour to the suggestion that he had been dragged down by the reptiles, but fancied that the boat might be securely padlocked, or that Pete had got it out, and, not knowing the force of the stream, had been swept away past where he should have landed, and with so big and heavy a boat he might not be able to get back. If this were the case Pete would escape, and he would have to go back to his prison.

"No, he would not forsake me," muttered Nic, with a strange glow about his heart as he thought of the man's fidelity to his cause; and he had just come to this conclusion when he heard a rustling behind him as of some creature creeping up. It was forgotten, though, the next moment, for unmistakably there was the sound of an oar whishing about in the water, as if someone had it over the stern and, fisherman fashions was sculling the boat towards the bank.

Then for a moment Nic was doubtful, for the sound ceased.

"It was one of the alligators," he muttered through his teeth, "and the poor fellow—"

There was a faint chirrup off the river, and once more Nic's heart beat wildly as he answered the signal. Then the sculling began again, the rustling was repeated somewhere behind

where Nic crouched, and he felt for the muskets to take them up.

"Whatever it is, I shall be aboard in a moment or two," he thought, with a strangely wild feeling of exultation; for he heard the oar drawn in, the head of the boat suddenly appeared close at hand, and it was run into the muddy, reedy bank a couple of yards away, while Pete leaped ashore with the painter.

"Now!" cried a loud voice, when, with a rush, half-a-dozen men sprang upon them from the bed of reeds and a fierce struggle began.

Chapter Thirty.

Making Friends of Enemies.

The struggle was very fierce but short. Nic fought his best, and, in spite of the excitement, wondered at his strength. He was encouraged, too, by Pete, whom he heard raging and tearing about; and, hard pressed as he was, he yet had a thought for his companion.

"Never mind me, Master Nic," he shouted. "Zwim for it—the boat. Never mind me."

Then his voice was smothered, and there was the sound of a heavy fall, but the struggle went on.

"Hold on!" came the voice of the overseer, giving his orders; and then that of the settler:

"Give in, you scoundrels!" he raged out. Then fiercely, "Hold their heads under water, boys, if they don't give in."

"All done now, sah," panted Samson, with his lips close to Nic's head, for he was across his prisoner's chest, and a couple of the blacks were holding his legs.

"Yes, we must give up, Master Nic," cried Pete. "I've got five loads o' black stuff sitting on me."

"Have you your whip with you, Saunders?" cried the settler.

"No, sir; I wish I had. But it is hanging by the door, and we can give them a better taste by daylight."

"You use it on him," roared Pete fiercely, "and I'll kill you."

"Silence, you scoundrel!" cried the settler, "or I'll have you gagged as well as ironed. I warned you both of what would happen if you tried to escape."

"Lucky for them I let loose the black dogs instead of the brown," cried the overseer. "We should not have had the trouble of taking them back. Tie their hands behind their backs, Samson, and have the irons ready as soon as we get to the house."

"Got no rope, sah."

"What!" cried the settler. "Why didn't you bring some, you black fool?"

"No time, sah," said the black humbly. "Soon as dat ugly ruffyum, Humpy, come knock at door and say dey 'scape, Zerk call me quite sharp, an' I come tell you, and dey fetch de boy and have 'em back. Me no t'ink 'bout no rope, sah; on'y t'ink dey go swim for de boat and catch 'em first."

"Quite right," said the settler more calmly. "There, one of you go in front of each man, and two others take fast hold of a wrist on each side. Cock your pistols, Saunders."

There was a sharp clicking sound.

"Walk behind that big scoundrel, and if he makes the slightest attempt to escape send a bullet through him. I'll look after this one. Pity we didn't stop to loose the dogs. Ready?"

"Iss, sah," came from Samson, as Nic felt a strong hand like a live handcuff upon each wrist.

"Lead on, then."

"You be very careful, please, massa; no make mistake and shoot dis boy."

"Oh yes, I'll take care."

The march back began, and at the second step Nic felt that a cold ring of iron had been pressed between his shoulders—the

pistol-muzzle resting upon his skin where the shirt had been torn down from neck to waist.

He could not suppress a shiver, for the heat and passion of the struggle had passed away, leaving him weary, aching, and depressed.

But in a few minutes the pistol-muzzle was withdrawn, it being awkward for the holder to walk over the rough ground and keep it there; and the prisoner marched on between his black warders as patiently as Pete in front, thinking perhaps the same ideas.

For he felt that they had not taken warning by the hints they had received. Humpy Dee had been on the watch, and, in his malignity, let them get away before giving notice to the sentry, that they might be caught, ironed, and flogged, or perhaps meet their death in the struggle.

But Nic had yet to find that Humpy Dee's designs were deeper than this.

The walk back was not long enough for a hundredth part of the bitter thoughts that crowded into Nic Revel's brain; neither would they have got a hearing had the distance been a thousand times the length, on account of the one dominant horror which filled his brain: "Will they flog us?—will they flog us?" That question was always repeating itself, and, when the prisoner heard Pete utter a low groan, he was convinced that the poor fellow was possessed by similar thoughts.

Only so short a time before that they had left their quarters, and now they were back in the darkness, their plans crushed, and only the punishment to look forward to.

"Now, Sam, be sharp with a couple of lanthorns and those irons," cried the overseer.

"Iss, sah."

"Prisoners been quiet?" whispered the settler to the sentry.

"Iss, sah, berry quiet; all fass asleep;" and the man let his musket fall down upon the ground with an ominous thud as, in obedience to an order, he unlocked the shed-door and lowered the huge bar before drawing it open.

"Now then," muttered the overseer, "how long is he going to be with that lantern? Here, in with them, boys; but don't loose your hold till I tell you."

Nic and Pete were hurried on; and, as soon as they were inside, the settler and his lieutenant stood in the doorway, pistol in hand, while Nic's face was involuntarily turned in the direction of the corner where Humpy Dee's bunk lay, in the full expectation of hearing some bantering sneer.

But the man made no sign, and directly after the *pad, pad* of Samson's feet was heard, and a faint light threw up the figures of those at the doorway. Then Samson's big black face appeared, lit up by the lanterns he swung, one in each hand.

"I take in de light, sah, and den go fetch de irons?"

"Yes; look sharp," cried Saunders.

He made way for the black to pass, and the man raised one of the lanterns to hang it upon a hook. He did not do this, but raised the other lantern and hurriedly took a few steps in the direction of the bunks, to begin shouting directly:

"Hyah!" he cried, "whar dem oder white fellow? You, Zerk, what you go and done wid de oder man?"

"What!" roared the settler and the overseer in a breath as they rushed forward, pistol in hand.

"All gone, sah," cried Samson, beginning to tremble.

"Bah! you 'most fass 'sleep," cried Xerxes, who had come in at the call of his companion; "dey all tuck under de corn-'talk."

"You black idiot!" roared the overseer, turning upon the sentry so savagely that the man's knees began to knock together; he let go his hold of his musket, and it fell on the floor with a thud, followed by a flash and an explosion, while the man escaped a knockdown blow by ducking.

"Here, quick!" cried the settler, who had seized one of the lanterns from Samson and convinced himself that the other prisoners had taken advantage of the hole made by Pete, and, as soon as the chase began, climbed quietly out in turn. "All of you follow. Pick up that musket and load it again, you black fool!"

"No 'top clap irons on dese two, sah?" cried Samson.

"No. Here, Saunders, fetch another musket. Samson, you and Nero guard these two while we're gone; and if you let them escape I'll shoot you."

"No, no," said Saunders quickly; "I'll manage them. We want all our men. Here, Sam; go and let loose the dogs."

"But these two?" cried the settler impatiently.

"Well, the dogs will watch them."

"We want them, man, to track the other scoundrels."

"We can do that ourselves. They followed us, for a hundred pounds, and have taken the boat by now."

The settler uttered a furious oath and stamped his foot.

"Sharper than we are," he roared. "Yes, that is right."

Just then the dogs, newly set at liberty, came bounding up, followed by Samson; and the overseer went up to the two prisoners.

"There, lie down in your kennels," he snarled. "We shall not be long, and it depends upon yourselves whether we find you when we come back. I warn you that if you move the hounds will tear you to pieces."

"Saunders!" whispered the settler.

"Their lives will be in their own hands, sir," cried the overseer warmly. "Let me have my own way, please; it is the only thing to do."

The settler shrugged his shoulders, and the blacks all stood there round-eyed and staring, while the two unfortunates lay down in their bunks, and the overseer called up the dogs and bade them couch.

"Watch," he said fiercely, and a deep-toned growl arose. "Stay there and watch."

"Now, sir," he said coldly, "the sooner we are off the better. Out with you, boys, and bring the lights."

The blacks ran out, the settler followed, and the overseer went to the door last.

"I've warned you," he said fiercely, as he turned to face the prisoners. "Make the slightest movement, and those hounds will be at your throats and rend you limb from limb. Good dogs, then—watch," he shouted; then he banged the door, locked and barred it, and just then the settler's voice was heard at a little distance.

"Here, Saunders," he cried; "two of the loaded muskets have been taken from the hooks."

"Hor, hor!" laughed Pete savagely; "just found that out?"

He ceased, for three dogs sprang to their feet, uttering a furious barking trio which made his heart seem to leap to his throat.

In the intense desire to save himself, Nic sprang up into a sitting position and spoke quickly and gently, calling to the dog which had shown a friendly disposition towards him from the first.

"Don't do that, Master Nic," said Pete hoarsely.

But even as the man spoke the dog was upon Nic's bunk, whining, pawing at him, and thrusting its great muzzle in his hand, uttering the while a low, eager bark.

The others barked too, and, as if in imitation of their companion, made at Nic as well, favouring him with their clumsy caresses, and ending by sitting close up to him, panting loudly.

"Have they killed you, Master Nic?" whispered Pete hoarsely, eliciting a fierce growl from one of the brutes.

"Quiet," cried Nic loudly, and the growling ceased; while the next moment from out of the darkness a great head began to nestle upon his shoulder. "Good dog, then!" cried Nic, patting and stroking its head. "There, I think you may venture to talk, Pete."

"Do you, zir? If I weren't beginning to think they'd done for you. Aren't you hurt, then?"

"No; they are used to us now, and I don't think there's anything to fear. Look here; do you dare to reach out your hand and pat him?"

"No, zir; I'm too great a coward. I was always feared of a dog's bite; not of the dog."

Nic was silent for a few moments, and then he began to pat first one dog and then another heavily, the great brutes submitting to the familiarities evidently with satisfaction, one of them beginning to bound about the shed, and returning to be caressed again.

"You order me to come close and pat one of 'em, Master Nic, and I will," said Pete hoarsely.

"Come on, then."

The man drew a deep breath and made the venture, with so much success attending it that he tried it upon the others.

"Master Nic," he whispered excitedly, "what do you think of that?"

"Of what?"

"Here's one of 'em licking my face. Oh, I zay, it don't mean tasting me first to zee whether I'm good, do it?"

"No; the poor brutes believe we are friends, I suppose, from being shut up with us. But, Pete, they've all gone off after the others. Couldn't we try to escape again?"

"Nay; t'others have got the boat."

"But the high ground yonder, or the woods?"

"Nay; they'd hunt us down with the dogs. The beggars would go at us if they hounded 'em on."

Nic was silenced for a few moments, and he sat with a dog on either side and his arms on their necks.

"But we could get out again; the shingles must be off the roof."

"Yes; that's how Humpy and the others got out, zir. They must ha' known all our plans."

"Let's creep out, then; the dogs couldn't follow."

"S'pose not, zir; but they'd make howl enough to bring the gaffers back to lay 'em on our scent. I don't think it's any use to try. I'd face it and the dogs too with my knife; they never took it away from me. Did they take yourn?"

"I don't know, Pete. No: here it is."

"And it would be too hard on you to have to face 'em. Best not to try. We had our go and missed; p'raps we'd better take what they give us and not grumble."

"Impossible, Pete. I'd rather face the dogs than the lash. But I don't believe they'd hurt us now."

"P'raps not, zir," said Pete sadly. "This here one's as playful as a puppy. He's 'tending to bite my arm, but he don't hurt a bit."

There was silence again for a few minutes, during which time Nic sat with his heart beating hard, listening to the familiar sounds which came from the forest, while the passionate desire to flee grew and grew till it swept everything before it.

"Pete," he cried at last, "we must escape. Better starve in the woods than lead such a life as this. We shall be flogged tomorrow, and it will kill me, I know."

"The dogs'll hunt us down if we go, lad, and we shall get it worse. Better face what we've got to have."

"I will not; I cannot, Pete. The way is open, man. Let's try for our liberty before these wretches come back."

"Zay the word, then, Master Nic; but the dogs is friends now, as long as we're quiet; they won't let us go."

"Ah, I know!" cried Nic wildly. "Why didn't I think of it before?"

"Think of what, zir?"

"This. Perhaps they might attack us if they thought they were going to be left."

"That's zo."

"And if we got away they'd be laid on our track."

"O' course, zir."

"Then we will not give Saunders the chance."

"I dunno what you mean, zir; but I'm ready for anything you tell me to do. What is it?"

"Take the dogs with us, man. I believe they'll follow us now."

"Take 'em with us?" panted Pete. "Why, o' course! I never thought o' that. But we can't, Master Nic; we're locked in."

"The roof's open. Look here, Pete; I'm going to climb out at once. The dogs will begin to bay at this, but as soon as I'm on the roof, ready to drop down, you get up, put your hands against the boards, and lay a-back. Then I'll call them. They'll scramble up, and I'll help them through. You come last."

"Think they'll do it?" said Pete, panting like one of the hounds.

"I'm sure they will."

"Be worse than the flogging," cried Pete excitedly; "they'll tear all the skin off my back. But I don't care; I'm ready. They'll leave the bones."

"Ready, then?" cried Nic. "The moment there's room make a back for the dogs."

The eager talking excited the great animals, and they began to sniff at the speakers and growl; but Nic's blood was up, and he was ready to risk an attack on the chance of his scheme succeeding.

"A dog is a dog, whether it's here or at home, and I know their nature pretty well."

The next moment he was proving it by leaping to his feet.

"Hey, boys, then!" he cried loudly; "the woods—a run in the woods!"

The dogs sprang round him, and began leaping up, barking excitedly.

"Come on, then," he shouted, though his heart leaped with a choking sensation at his mouth; and, scrambling up to the opening by means of the pegs, he was the next minute

squeezing himself through, the dogs bounding up at him as he went, and nearly causing him to fall. For one moment he felt he was being dragged back, and shuddered at the thought of what might happen if the excited animals got him down.

But the dread passed away as quickly as it had come. He tore off another of the shingles to widen the opening, and shouted down into the shed:

"Come on, then. Come on."

Already the hounds were growing savage in their disappointment, and baying and growling with tremendous clamour, as they kept on leaping over each other and dropping back.

But at the words of encouragement from above one of them awoke to the fact that there was a step all ready in the darkness, and, leaping upon it, the great creature reached up, got its paws on the sides of the opening, scrambled through without help from Nic, as he sat on the roof, and leaped down.

That was enough; the others followed quickly, and the next minute Pete was up, seated by Nic's side, the dogs now leaping at them from below, barking loudly.

"Hurt?" panted Nic.

"Not a bit. Durst us jump down?"

"We must," cried Nic firmly; and, shouting to the dogs, he lowered himself down, dropped to the ground, and was followed by Pete.

"Hie on, boys! Forward, then!" cried Nic, as the dogs leaped and bounded around him, and he began to trot away from the river.

"Which way?" said Pete, who was as excited now as his companion.

"Wherever the dogs lead us," replied Nic. "Anywhere away from this slavery and death. Forward, then, boys! Hie on!"

The dogs ceased barking and began dashing on through the plantation leading to the nearest wood. The hunt was up, and Nic had rightly weighed their nature. They were off in chase of something; that was enough, and the two men followed, feeling

that at last they were on the highroad to freedom, with their most dreaded enemies turned to friends.

"Master Nic," said Pete hoarsely as they trotted on, step for step following the sound made by the heavy dogs, "I aren't never been a 'ligious sort of a chap, but would it be any harm if, instead o' kneeling down proper, I was to try and say a prayer as we run?"

"Harm, Pete?" cried Nic, with a wild, hysterical ring in his voice; "it could not be. Why, I've been praying for help ever since I leaped down among those savage beasts. I could not have ventured but for that."

Sound travels far during the night, and, though the fugitives were not aware of it, their attempt to escape was known. For, just when the dogs were free of the shed and were baying their loudest, the settler, at the head of his men, turned to Saunders:

"Hear that?" he said hoarsely.

"Yes. They've risked it, and the dogs are running them down. Well, they have only themselves to thank; I wash my hands of it all."

The settler shuddered, for his companion's words had brought up a thought that was full of horror; and for a moment he was about to order his blacks to turn back. But just then the overseer whispered:

"Keep up, sir; not a sound, please. We shall have them now."

"No firing," said the settler quickly; "they will be unarmed."

"I don't know that," said the overseer; "but we shall soon know. Hadn't we better deal with them as they deal with us? Hark! the dogs are quiet now. They've got their prisoners, and, if I'm not wrong, in a few minutes we shall have taken ours."

"Heah dat, Zerk?" whispered Samson.

There was a grunt.

"You an' me's gwan to have de arm-ache to-morrow morn' wid all dat lot to flog."

"Iss," whispered Xerxes; "and den got to go and bury dem oder one bones."

Chapter Thirty One.

A Night's Muddle.

On went the dogs, apparently following the track of some animal; and, as they seemed to be leading the fugitives farther and farther away from the plantation, nothing Nic felt, could be better.

For, in spite of the long imprisonment at the settler's place, the knowledge of the prisoners was confined to the river and the clearings about the house. Certainly they had had a view of the distant hills; but all beyond the plantation, save towards the swamp, was unknown land.

"We can't do better than go on, Pete," said Nic, after following the dogs for about an hour.

"Don't see as we can, zir. They're hunting after zomething they've got the zmall of, and maybe, if we cross their scent, they may begin hunting us; zo I zay let 'em go. You zee, they're mostly kep' chained up in them gashly kennels o' theirs; and they're enjoying a run in the woods. Any idee where we be?"

"Not the slightest, Pete; but at any rate we're free."

"Till we're ketched again, Master Nic. But I zay, you'll show fight if they should catch up to uz?"

"Yes, Pete; I should feel so desperate that I should be ready to die sooner than give up now."

"That's me all over, lad," said Pete. "I zay, though; couldn't get to be more friends still wi' the dogs, and make 'em fight for uz, could we?"

Nic laughed bitterly, and then stopped short, for the yelping had ceased.

"Can you hear the hounds now?"

A sharp burst of barking a short distance away told of their direction, and after wandering in and out among the trees for a few minutes, they found the three great creatures apparently waiting for them to come up before starting off again.

This went on for a full hour longer, the dogs leading them on and on, evidently getting scent of one of the little animals the blacks hunted from time to time; but from their clumsiness, and the activity of the little quarry, each run being without result.

"Where are we now?" said Pete at last, after the yelping of the little pack had ceased.

"It is impossible to say," replied Nic. "It is all so much alike here in the darkness that I have felt helpless ever since we started; but we must be many miles away from the plantation, and I hardly know how the night has gone in this excitement; but it must be near morning."

"Must be," said Pete, "for my clothes are quite dry again, and I'm getting thirsty. What are we going to do now?"

"Keep on, and coax the dogs more and more away. We must not let them go back."

"No; that wouldn't do, Master Nic. On'y if they don't ketch anything they'll get hungry, and if they gets hungry they'll grow zavage; and if they grow zavage, what's going to happen then?"

"Wait till the trouble comes, Pete," replied Nic; "then we'll see."

"That's good zense, Master Nic; and I b'lieve them brutes are lying down and resting zomewhere. Shall I give a whistle?"

"Yes; it would do no harm."

Pete uttered a low, piping sound such as would be given by a bird, and it was answered by a bark which showed the direction; and, on turning towards it, a minute had not elapsed before they heard the heavy panting of the three animals, which sprang up and came to them, lolling out their tongues to be caressed.

"Good old dogs, then," said Nic, patting their heads. "Go on, and take us right away, and when it gets daylight you may all have a good sleep. Hie on, then, boys; hie on! Right away."

The dogs threw up their heads, snuffed about a bit, and then started off once more at a steady pace, which soon slowed down, and made the task of following them in the darkness much less difficult. Then all at once one of them uttered a low, whining sound and sprang off a little faster.

For the ground was more open here, the trees bigger, and the undergrowth—the great hindrance—scarce.

"Better going here, Master Nic, if it weren't for the great roots sticking out. Now, if the day would only break we should be able to zee better what we were doing. My word! if we could only come across a good wild-apple orchard it wouldn't be amiss."

"And that we shall not find."

"Never mind, zir; we'll find zum'at else—toadstools on the trees, or wild berries, or zomething; and if them dogs don't run down anything good for a roast, why, they don't come up to one of our old Devon lurchers. If this was one of our woods we shouldn't be long without something between our teeth. Don't you be downhearted; I'll find zome'at we can eat."

"I am not downhearted, Pete; and, if we can do so in safety, we'll go on walking all day."

"That's right; on'y we don't want to run upon no more plantations."

"No; we must trust to the wild country, Pete, till we can reach the sea."

"And not feel zafe when we get there, zir. Zay, Master Nic, I don't think much of a country where they has zlaves, whether they're white or whether they're black."

"Never mind that now, Pete; we have escaped."

"And without my having a chance to thrash Humpy Dee, and giving Master Zaunders one for his nob."

"Hist! what's that?" whispered Nic, as a peculiar sound came through the trees.

"Water!" said Pete excitedly. "The dogs lapping. Come on, zir. My mouth's as if it was full of dust. The very thing we want."

The next minute the darkness seemed to be less intense, and in another they were close to a little stream, where the dogs were drinking deeply; but they left the edge as the fugitives came up, shook themselves, and stood by while Pete sought for a place a little higher up.

"Here you are, Master Nic," he said. "They might ha' let uz have first go; but I forgive 'em for finding it. Lie down on your face and drink."

Nic needed no incitement, and Pete followed his example, both enjoying the sweetest, most refreshing draught that had ever passed their lips.

"Hall!" ejaculated Pete as he raised himself into a sitting posture. "Can't drink any more. Hope we aren't zwallowed no young 'gators or a snake; but if we have, zir, it'll be vittles as well as drink, and do uz good."

"Ugh! don't talk about it," said Nic. "But where are the dogs?"

"Eh? Gone on, I s'pose; and we must trot on too. I'm ready for anything now."

"Look, Pete. Yonder's the east."

"That's our way then, zir."

"And the sun will not be long before it's up. It is getting light fast. Come along and find the dogs. We came up from the left; they will go right on to the right. We should have heard them if they had crossed the stream."

"That's right, lad. What a good—" Pete was going to say poacher, but he checked himself—"wood-man you'd have made. Forward, then. It's all open yonder."

A minute later they had stopped short, to see the three dogs walking across a clearing, plainly seen in the grey dawn, while to the left the stream had widened out.

It was only a momentary pause, and then the fugitives shrank back into cover, chilled to the heart by the dreadful truth.

The dogs, quite at home in the neighbouring forest, had taken them a long round, and brought them back to the plantation; and now, wearied out, they were making their way to their kennel at the back of the house and sheds.

The night's labour seemed to have been all in vain; and Nic laid his hand upon his companion's shoulder as he said, with a bitter sigh:

"Pete, Pete, it is hopeless. We shall never see the old home again."

Chapter Thirty Two.

Never say die.

"What zay?" cried Pete sharply. "Never zay die, lad. English lads are never beat. Look at that!"

He pointed through the trees at where the streamlet widened into the little creek where they had first landed, and Nic rubbed his eyes, refusing to believe in what he saw.

But there it was plain enough in the dim, grey dawn—the boat lying tied up to the post; and a great sob rose to the poor fellow's lips, while for a few moments he could not stir.

Then a thrill of excitement ran through him as he looked round and saw that the dogs had passed out of sight beyond the long, low shed which had been their jail.

It came like a flash to him now what must have taken place—one of those guesses at the truth which hit the mark. He knew that his enemies had dashed off in pursuit of the men who had made for the boat.

They must have been overtaken during the night, brought back, and were doubtless at that moment shut up in their old quarters.

Nic hurriedly told Pete his impression, and the latter slapped his leg.

"That's it," he said, "and zarve 'em right, zir. That's tumbling into the hole you made for zomebody else, isn't it? That's why they've not blown the old shell yet and didn't put the boat back. Been out all night."

"Could we make sure by trying to see whether there is any one on guard at the barrack-door?"

"Zoon do that, zir," said Pete; and, going down upon hands and knees, he crawled away among the bushes, to be back in a few minutes.

"Old Zamson and Zerk both there at the door, zir, with guns."

"Then they have caught them," said Nic excitedly. "But the blacks are both sitting down, fast asleep, zir."

"Worn out with their night's work, Pete; but the prisoners will be well ironed and safe enough."

"Ay, zir, or they'd have had the boat by now."

"Now then, can we crawl to it under cover? We must be off at once."

"Couldn't on'y crawl half-way, zir, and then it's all open, and we might be shot at if they zaw us from the house. Better make a dash for it at once and chance it."

"Come on, then," cried Nic; and they ran as quickly as they could down by the side of the creek, reached the boat in safety, found that the poles and oars were in their places, and jumped in.

There was no stopping to untie the rope which ran across the gunwale. Pete's knife flew out and sawed through it in a moment or two. Then one vigorous thrust sent the craft into the stream; but before they had cleared the creek there was a shout, followed by the whiz of a bullet and the report of a musket.

"All right; fire away. Shouldn't come back if you was a ridgment of zojers," cried Pete, who was sending the boat along vigorously with the pole. "Lie down, Master Nic; they're going to shoot again."

"And leave you there?" cried Nic. "No."

Instead of screening himself by the boat's side, Nic seized two oars, got them over the rowlocks, and as soon as they were in the river he began to pull with all his might, watching the figure of Saunders limping slowly down after them and stopping from time to time for a shot; Samson and Xerxes, wakened by the firing, hurrying up, handing him a fresh musket, and reloading each time.

"Don't see nothing of the gaffer," said Pete coolly; "he must have been hurt too, or he'd have been after us. There come the blacks. Hear that?"

Plainly enough, for the whistle was very shrill, and it was answered by the dogs, which came tearing round the end of the shed to follow the overseer.

"Row faster than they can zwim," said Pete, laying down the pole. "Here, give us one oar, Master Nic," he continued; and, taking his seat, the oar was handed to him, and, aided by the current, the boat began to move more swiftly.

"Why, there's the gaffer," cried Pete suddenly; and Nic saw that the settler was coming down from the house by the help of a stick, while the dogs stood close by Saunders, barking loudly.

"There must have been a desperate fight in the night, Pete," cried Nic. "Look, there are two of the blacks with their heads tied up."

"And jolly glad I am, Master Nic. I shouldn't have cried much if they'd all killed one another and left nothing but the bones. There, put that gun away, stoopid; you can't hit us at this distance."

The overseer seemed to have thought so too, for he lowered the musket, and Nic just caught sight of him striking savagely with it at the dogs, which began to bay and make rushes at him. But Nic saw no more, for a bend in the river, with a clump of trees thereon, hid the plantation from their sight; while Pete began to sing an old West-country ditty, something about a clever moneyless adventurer who, no matter what task he undertook, always succeeded in getting the best of his adversaries.

The words were absurd and often childish, but there was a ring in the familiar old melody that went straight to Nic's heart and brought a strange moisture to his eyes, for it thrilled him with hope, and brought up memories of the far-away home that he began to feel now he might see again. And that feeling of hope drove away the horrible dread and the miserable sensation of weariness, sending vigour through every nerve, and making him bend to his oar to take a full grip of the water and swing back at the same moment as Pete, making the river ripple and plash beneath the bows and driving the boat merrily along, just as if the two fugitives were moved by the same spirit.

"Zome zaid a penny, but I zaid five poun'.
The wager was laid, but the money not down.
Zinging right fol de ree, fol de riddle
lee

While I am a-zinging I'd five poun' free,"

chanted Pete in a fine, round, musical bass voice, and the trees on one side echoed it back, while the ungreaed rowlocks, as the oars swung to and fro, seemed to Nic's excited fancy to keep on saying, "Dev-on, Dev-on, Dev-on," in cheery reiteration.

"Zinging right fol de ree!" cried Pete. "Zay, Master Nic, why don't you join in chorus? You know that old zong."

"Ay, Pete, I know it," said Nic; "but my heart's too full for singing."

"Nay, not it, lad. Do you good. That's why I began. Mine felt so full that it was ready to burst out, and if I hadn't begun to zing I should ha' broken zomething. I zay, Master Nic, get out o' stroke and hit me a good whack or two with your oar and fisties, right in the back."

"What for?"

"To waken me up. I'm dreaming, I'm afraid, and I'd rather be roused up than go on in a dream like this. It's zo hearty, you zee, and makes me feel as if I could go on rowing for a month without getting tired."

"So do I now, Pete."

"Well, that's real, Master Nic. I dunno, though; p'raps it aren't, and I want it cut short. It would be horrid to wake up and find it all zleep-hatching; but the longer I go on the worse I shall be. It's dreaming, aren't it, and we didn't get away?"

"You know it is not a dream, Pete," replied Nic. "We have escaped—I mean, we have begun to escape."

"Begun, lad? Why, we've half-done it," cried Pete, who was wild with excitement. "Pull away, and let's zhow 'em what West-country muscles can do. Pull lad, pull, and keep me at it, or I zhall be getting up and dancing zailor's hornpipe all over the boat, and without music. Music! Who wants music? My heart's full of music and zinging of home again, and I don't know what's come to my eyes. Master Nic, all this river, and the trees, and fog rising on each zide through the trees, looks zo beautiful that I must be dreaming. Zay, lad, do tell me I ra-ally am awake."

"Yes, Pete, awake—wide awake; and I am feeling just the same. My heart's beating with hope as it never beat before."

"Hooroar for Master Nic's heart!" cried the big fellow wildly. "Beat away, good old heart, for we're going to do it, and it'll be just as easy as kissing your hand."

"We mustn't be too sanguine."

"Oh yes, we must, lad. I don't know what being zangwing is, but if it's anything to do with fancying we shall get away, I zay let's be as zangwing as we can. None of your getting into the dumps and 'shan't do it' now. We're free, my lad—free; and I should just like to have a cut at any one as zays we aren't. Zlaves, indeed! White zlaves! But I knowed it couldn't last. You can't make a zlave of an Englishman, Master Nic. You may call him one, and put irons on him, or shut him up like zyder in a cask, and hammer the bung in; but zooner or later he'll zend the bung out flying, or burst the hoops and scatter the staves. It was only waiting our chance, and we've got it; and here we are rowing down this here river in the boat, and they may hoe the old plantation themselves. Zay, Master Nic."

"Yes, Pete."

"Don't it zeem strange what a differ a black skin makes in a man?"

"What do you mean—in the colour?"

"Nay-ay-ay-ay, lad! I mean 'bout being a zlave. Here's these niggers brought here and made zlaves of, and they zettles down to it as happy-go-lucky as can be. They don't zeem to mind. They eat and drink all they can, and zleep as much as they can, and they do as little work as they can. Why, I zometimes did three times as much hoeing as one o' they in a day; and that aren't bragging."

"No, Pete; they took it very easy."

"I should just think they did, my lad; and then the way they'd laugh! I never zee any one laugh as they could. I s'pose that's what makes their mouths zo big and their teeth zo white. Gets 'em bleached by opening their mouths zo wide."

"Look, Pete!" whispered Nic. "Wasn't that something moving on the right bank?"

"Yes; I zee it, Master Nic. Dunno what it was, but it weren't a man on the watch. Zay; they aren't got another boat anywhere, have they?"

"Oh no; I feel sure they have not," said Nic sharply.

"Then we're all right. This water's running zwift, and we're making the boat move pretty fast. They can't zwim half as fast as we're going, and they've no horses, and the dogs can't smell on the river, even if they made a raft of the trees they've got cut down yonder."

"It would take them a day, Pete."

"Ay, it would, Master Nic; and going on as we're going, we shall be a long way on at the end of a day."

"Yes; we shall be some distance towards the mouth. I begin to think, Pete, that we shall really manage to escape."

"Yes, we've done it this time, Master Nic; and we only want a veal-pie, a cold zalmon, a couple o' loaves, and a stone bottle o' zyder, to be 'bout as happy as any one could be."

"But do you think we can reach the mouth of the river without being stopped?"

"Don't zee who's to stop uz, zir," said Pete coolly. "What we've got to do is to row a steady stroke till we come to a place where we can get zome'at to eat; and then we'll row right out to zea, and get ourselves picked up by the first ship we can board. But we zeem to want that there veal-pie, cold zalmon, two loaves, and the stone bottle."

"Yes, we want provisions, Pete. Are you keeping a good, sharp lookout?"

"I just am, Master Nic. I'm afraid it's taking zome of the bark off when I look among the trees. But we needn't; nobody can't overtake uz unless we tie the boat up to a tree on the bank and lie down to go to zleep."

"And that we shall not even think of doing, Pete."

"That's zo, Master Nic. But by-and-by, when the zun gets hot and you're a bit tired, we'll get ashore zomewhere to break off a few good leafy boughs and make a bit of a shelter in the stern of the boat, zo as you can lie down and have a zleep."

"Or you, Pete."

"When it's my turn, Master Nic. We'll take watch and watch, as the zailors call it, zo as to keep the boat going till we get aboard a ship. I zay, how far do you make it to the landing-place where we come aboard the boat?"

"I can't say, Pete," replied Nic. "I was in such a confused state that I have lost all count."

"And I aren't much better, zir. You zee, we landed and slept on the road, and that took up time; but I've allowed us three days and nights as being plenty to get down to the zea; and that means tying up to the bank when the river's again' uz—I mean, when we come to where the tide runs, for we should knock ourzelves up trying to pull this heavy, lumbering old boat against the stream."

Nic nodded, as he kept on looking anxiously astern; but he said nothing, and they rowed steadily on.

"Zay, Master Nic," said Pete suddenly.

"Yes."

"Getting hot, aren't it?"

"Terribly."

"Well, I can't zay that, zir, because the zun aren't shining now on a zlave's back; it's on a free man's, and that makes all the differ. But what are you thinking about?"

"The possibility of seeing another boat coming round the bend of the river."

"It's impossible, zir. The gaffer hadn't got no other boat to come in. I believe we was the only other planters up the river, and that there'll be no boat till we come to the places where we stayed of a night, and it's a zight nearer the zea. I keep on thinking, though, a deal."

"What about—our escaping?"

"Nay. It's very queer, Master Nic, and I s'pose it's because I'm zo empty."

"Thinking of food, Pete?" said Nic sadly.

"Yes, Master Nic. More I tries not to, more I keeps on 'bout veal-pie, cold zalmon, and zyder."

"Ah yes, we must contrive to get some provisions after a bit."

They rowed on in silence for some time, with the sun gathering power and beating down upon their heads, and flashing back from the surface of the river, till at last Pete said suddenly:

"We must run the boat ashore close to those trees, Master Nic, or we shall be going queer in the head for want of cover."

"Yes; I feel giddy now, Pete. Do you think we could tie a few leaves together for hats?"

"You'll zee, my lad," said the man. "I could do it best with rushes, but I'll work zomething to keep off the zun."

The boat was run in under the shade of a tree whose boughs hung down and dipped in the running stream; and as Pete laid in his oar he glanced down over the side and saw fish gliding away, deep down in the transparent water.

"Zee um, zir?" said Pete.

"Yes; there are some good-sized fish, Pete."

"And either of 'em would make uz a dinner if we'd got a line."

"And bait, Pete."

"Oh, I'll manage a bait, Master Nic. Dessay they'd take a fly, a beetle, or a berry, or a worm, but I aren't got neither hook nor line. I'm going to have one, though, zoon, for the way I'm thinking o' cold zalmon is just horrid. I could eat it raw, or live even, without waiting for it to be cooked. These aren't zalmon, but they're vish."

Nic said little, for he could think of nothing but the overseer coming into sight with musket and dogs, and his eyes were constantly directed up the river.

But Pete took it all more calmly. He had dragged the boat beneath the shade of the overhanging tree, secured it to one of the boughs with the remains of the rope, several feet having fortunately been passed through the ring-bolt to lie loose in the bottom; and while Nic kept watch he roughed out something in

the shape of a couple of basket-like caps, wove in and out a few leaves, and ended by placing them before his companion.

"They aren't very han'some, Master Nic," he said, "but they'll keep the zun off. What do you zay now to lying down and having a nap while I take the watch?"

"No, no," cried Nic excitedly; "let's go on at once."

"I'm ready, Master Nic, but, if you could take both oars, I've been thinking that I could cut off one sleeve of my shirt, loosen and pull out the threads, and then twissen 'em up into a sort o' fishing-line, paying it over with some of the soft pitch here at the bottom of the boat, so as it would hold together a bit."

"And what about a fish-hook?" asked Nic.

"Ah, that's what bothers me, master. I've been thinking that when we get on into that great big marsh of a place where the river runs through the trees we might stop and vish, for there must be plenty there, or else the 'gators wouldn't be so plentiful. I did zee one big fellow, close to the top, in the clear water where it looked like wine. I thought it was a pike as we come up, and I felt as if I should like to try for him; but how to do it without a hook's more than I can tell. But we must have zomething to eat, Master Nic, or we shall be starved, and never get away after all."

"Go on making your line," said Nic thoughtfully. "I'll row."

As Nic took both oars Pete unfastened the piece of rope, and the boat began to glide along with the stream, while the latter burst into a low and hearty laugh.

"On'y think o' that now, Master Nic. There's no need for me to spoil my shirt when there's a vishing-line half-made, and a hook waiting to be finished."

"Where? What do you mean?" cried Nic excitedly. "Why, here in the bows, lad. I've on'y got to unlay this piece o' rope—it's nearly new—and then I can twist up yards o' line."

"But the hook, man—the hook?"

"There it be, Master Nic—the ring in the bolt. I've on'y got to zaw it through with my knife, bend it to get it out, and then hammer one part out straight, ready to tie on to the line, and there you are."

"But—"

"Oh, I know; it won't be as good as a cod-hook, because it won't have no point nor no barb, but I'll tie a big frog or a bit o' zomething on to it, and if I don't yank a vish out with it afore night I never caught a zalmon."

Nic winced a little at the word "salmon," but he kept his thoughts to himself and went on rowing; while Pete set to work with such goodwill that he soon had plenty of the rope unlaaid, and began to plait the hempen threads into a coarse line, which grew rapidly between his clever fingers. But many hours had passed, and they were gliding through the interminable shades of the cypress swamp before he prepared to saw at the ring.

It was Nic who made the next suggestion.

"Pete," he said quickly, "why not take the head off the pole? It is very small for a boat-hook, and it is quite bright. There's a hole for you to fasten the line to, and a big pike-like fish might run at it as it is drawn through the water."

"Of course it might, lad. Well, that is a good idea. Why weren't I born clever?"

Pete set to work at once, and after a great deal of hard work he managed to cut away the wood from the nail-like rivet which held the head on to the shaft, after which a few blows sufficed to break the iron hook away, with the cross rivet still in place, ready to serve as a hold for the newly-made line.

"Wonder whether a vish'll take it, Master Nic," said Pete as he stood up in the boat. "Now if it was one o' them 'gators I could lash my knife on to the end of the pole and spear a little un, but I s'pose it wouldn't be good to eat."

Nic shook his head.

"Might manage one to-morrow, zir, if we don't ketch a vish."

Nic shook his head again.

"I mean, zir, when we're nex' door to starvation-point. Don't feel as if I could touch one to-day."

"Don't talk about the horrible reptiles, Pete," said Nic, with a shudder.

"Right, Master Nic, I won't, for horrid they be; and I don't mind telling you that when I zwimmed across to get this boat I was in such a fright all the time that I felt all of a zweat. I don't know whether I was, for it don't zeem nat'ral-like for a man to come all over wet when he's all wet already; but that's how I felt. There we are, then. I'm ready, Master Nic, if you'll go on steady, on'y taking a dip now and then to keep her head straight."

He held up the iron hook, which began to spin round, and he chuckled aloud.

"I wouldn't be zuch a vool as to throw a thing like that into the water at home, Master Nic," he said, "for no vish would be zuch a vool as to run at it; but out here the vish are only zavages, and don't know any better. That's what I hopes."

Nic began to dip an oar now and then, so as to avoid the rotten stumps, snags, and half-fallen trees, as the stream carried them on, so that he had little opportunity for noting the occupants of this dismal swamp; but Pete's eyes were sharp, and he saw a good deal of the hideous, great lizard-like creatures lying about on the mud or upon rotten trunks, with their horny sides glistening in the pencils of light which pierced the foliage overhead, or made sunny patches where, for the most part, all was a dim twilight, terribly suggestive of what a man's fate might be if he overbalanced himself and fell out of the boat.

"I believe them great 'gators are zo hungry," said Pete to himself, "that they'd rush at one altogether and finish a fellow, bones and all."

At last: "Looks a reg'lar vishy place, Master Nic; zo here goes."

Pete gave the bright hook a swing and cast it half-a-dozen yards from the boat to where it fell with a splash, which was followed by a curious movement of the amber-hued water; and then he began to snatch with the line, so as to make the bright iron play about.

Then there was a sudden check.

"Back water, Master Nic," cried Pete. "I'm fast in zomething."

"Yes," said Nic, obeying his order; "you're caught in a sunken tree. Mind, or you'll break your line."

"That's what I'm feared on, Master Nic, but it's 'bout the liveliest tree I ever felt. Look where the line's going. I'm feared it's gone."

The line was cutting the water and gliding through Pete's fingers till he checked it at the end, when a black tail rose above the surface and fell with a splash, and the line slackened and was hauled in.

"Hook aren't gone, zir," said Pete as he drew it over the side. "Rum vishing that there. Why, it were one o' them 'gators, five or six foot long. Let's try lower down."

They tried as Pete suggested, and there was another boil in the water, but the hook was drawn in without a touch; and Pete tried again and again, till he felt the glistening iron seized by something which held on fast.

"Got him this time, zir," said Pete, with his face lighting up. "It's a vish now. One o' they pike things, and not zo very big."

"Haul in quick," cried Nic.

It was an unnecessary order, for the line was rapidly drawn close inboard, and Pete lowered one hand to take a short grip and swing his captive out of the water. But he put too much vigour into the effort, and flung his prize right over just as it shook itself clear of the hook, and fell upon the gunwale before glancing off back into the water. No fish, but an alligator about thirty inches long.

"Ugh!" ejaculated Pete; "and I thought I'd got a vish. Never mind, Master Nic. We'll have zomething good yet."

His companion did not feel hopeful. It was evident that the water swarmed with the reptiles, and in spite of the terribly faint sensation of hunger that was increasing fast, Nic felt disposed to tell his companion to give up trying, when suddenly there was a fierce rush after the glistening hook as it was being dragged through the water, a sudden check, and the water boiled again as Pete hauled in the line, sea fishing fashion, to get his captive into the boat before it could struggle free from the clumsy hook.

This time success attended Pete's efforts. He got hold of the line close to the iron, and with a vigorous swing threw his prize into the boat just as the hook came away, leaving the fish to begin

leaping about, till Nic stunned it with a heavy blow from the boat-hook pole.

"I knowed we should do it, Master Nic," said Pete triumphantly. "There now, aren't it zummat like one of our big pike at home? Now, that's good to eat; and the next game's tie up to the zhore where there's some dry wood, and we'll light a fire."

"Yes," said Nic as he bent over their prize. "I suppose it's what they call the alligator-gar, Pete."

"Dessay it is, zir; but I don't care what they calls it—Ah, would you?" cried Pete, stamping his bare foot upon the great fish as it made a leap to escape. Nic too was on the alert, and he thrust the ragged head of the pole between the teeth-armed, gaping jaws, which closed upon it fiercely and held on.

But Pete's knife was out next moment, and a well-directed cut put the savage creature beyond the power to do mischief.

"A twenty-pounder, Master Nic. Wish it were one o' your zalmon. There, I'll zoon clean him, while you run the boat in at a good place."

"But how are we to get a fire, Pete?" said Nic anxiously, for an intense feeling of hunger now set in.

"I'll zoon show you that, lad," replied Pete; and he did. In a very short time after, by means of a little flint he carried in company with his pocket-knife, the back of the blade, and some dry touchwood from a rotting tree, he soon had a fire glowing, then blazing, for there was dead-wood enough to make campfires for an army.

Another quarter of an hour passed, and the big fish was hissing and spluttering on a wooden spit over the glowing embers; and at last they were able to fall to and eat of the whitest, juiciest flesh—as it seemed to them—that they had ever tasted.

"Bit o' zalt'd be worth anything now, Master Nic, and I wouldn't turn up my nose at a good thick bit o' bread and butter, and a drop o' zyder'd be better than river water; but, take it all together, I zay as zalmon's nothing to this here, and we've got enough to last uz for a couple or three days to come."

"Now for a few big leaves to wrap the rest in," said Nic at last, after they had thoroughly satisfied their hunger.

"Right, Master Nic; but I must have a good drink o' water first."

"Yes," said Nic, suddenly awakening to the fact that he was extremely thirsty, and he rose to his feet to utter a cry of horror.

"Pete—Pete! The boat! the boat!"

Pete leaped up and stared aghast, for the action of the running stream had loosened the thin remnants of the rope with which they had moored their boat. These had parted, and the craft was gliding rapidly away, a quarter of a mile down the river.

Chapter Thirty Three.

A Stern-Chase.

"Oh, why didn't I watch it?" groaned Pete, in agony; and his next glance was along the bank of the river, with the idea of running till opposite the boat.

He groaned again as he grasped the fact that he could not run, only walk for two or three yards before the dense tangle of the forest commenced, and progress through that was impossible.

"Means zwim for it, Master Nic," he cried, with an attempt at being cheery; "but look here, lad, if you zee me pulled down by them 'gators or vish, let it be a lesson to you. Don't you try the water."

Then to himself, as he plunged in:

"Why, o' course he wouldn't. What's the good o' saying that?"

The water was deep and clear close in to the overhanging bank, and Pete dived out of sight, scaring some occupant of the river, which swept itself away with as much commotion in the water as was caused by the man's dive; but when he rose to the surface, yards away, shook his head, and glanced back over his left shoulder, it was to see Nic's head rise a short distance behind him, for the younger man had followed on the instant.

Pete ceased swimming, to allow his companion to come abreast.

"Oh, Master Nic!" he cried, "you zouldn't ha' done that;" and he glanced wildly about him as if expecting to see the rugged head of an alligator rise close by. "Go back, lad; go back. It's on'y one man's work."

"Go back? No," said Nic firmly. "We must fight it out, shoulders together, Pete. Come on."

Pete gave vent to something like a sob, and his face grew wrinkled; but the next moment he forced a smile.

"Well, you're master," he said cheerily; "zo now for it, zir. You zwim lighter than I do, but I'll race you down to the boat. Virst to lay a hand on gunwale wins."

"Come on," said Nic, fighting hard to master the horrible feeling that at any moment they might be attacked from beneath by one or other of the fierce creatures which inhabited the stream—Nic's dread being mostly respecting the shark-like gar-fish, which he knew must be abundant.

Pete shared his dread, but they both kept their thoughts to themselves as they swam on with strong, steady strokes, their light clothing of shirt and short drawers impeding them but slightly. Life from childhood on the seashore had conduced to making them expert swimmers; the swift stream helped them famously; and, keeping well away towards the middle to avoid the eddies near the shore, they went on steadily after the boat.

But this, in its light state, was being swept rapidly on, and had so good a start that for some time the swimmers did not seem to gain upon it in the least, and at last, as the distance still remained about the same, a feeling of despair began to attack them.

Pete saw the change in his fellow-swimmer's countenance.

"Take it easy, Master Nic. Long ztroke and zlow. We could keep this up all day. On'y got to zwim steady: river does all the work."

"We must swim faster, Pete, or we shall never reach the boat," cried Nic.

"Nay, lad; if we zwim hard we shall get tired out, and lose ground then. Easy as you can. She may get closer in and be caught by zome of the branches."

Nic said no more, but swam on, keeping his straining eyes fixed upon the ever-distant boat, till at last hope began to rise again, for the craft did happen to be taken by the eddy formed by a stream which joined the river, and directly after they saw it being driven towards one of the huge trees which dipped its pendent boughs far out in the water.

The feeling of excitement made Nic's breath come thick and fast as he saw the boat brush against the leafage, pause for a few moments, and the young man was ready to utter a cry of joy, but it died out in a low groan, for the boat continued its progress, the twigs swept over it, and the power of the stream mastered. But it was caught again, and they saw it heel over a little, free itself, and then, swaying a little, it seemed to bound on faster than ever.

"Never mind, lad," said Pete coolly; "it'll catch again soon."

Pete was right; the boat was nearer to the wall of verdure, and it once more seemed to be entangled in some boughs which dipped below the surface and hung there, while the swimmers reduced the distance between them and the boat forty or fifty yards. Then, with a swift gliding motion, it was off again.

"That's twice," cried Pete. "Third time does it. Zay, Master Nic, aren't the water nice and cold?"

The look which Nic gave the speaker in his despair checked Pete's efforts to make the best of things.

"A beast!" he muttered to himself. "I should like to drive my hoof through her planks. Heavy boat? Why, she dances over the water like a cork."

At that moment Nic could not suppress a sharp cry, and he made a spasmodic dash through the water.

"Eh, my lad, what is it?" cried Pete, who was startled.

"One of the great fishes or reptiles made a dash at me and struck me on the leg," gasped Nic.

"Nay, nay, don't zay that, lad. You kicked again a floating log. There's hunderds allus going down to the zea."

Nic shook his head, and Pete felt that he was right, for the next minute he was swimming on with his keen-edged knife held in his teeth, ready for the emergency which he felt might come;

but they suffered no further alarm. Disappointment followed disappointment, and weariness steadily set in; but they swam steadily on, till Nic's strength began to fail. He would not speak, though, till, feeling that he had done all that was possible, he turned his despairing eyes to Pete.

Before he could speak the latter cried:

"I knowed it, Master Nic, and expected it ever so long past. Now, you just turn inshore along with me; then you shall lie down and rest while I go on and ketch the boat. But how I'm to pull her back again' this zwiff stream, back to you, my lad, is more'n I know."

Nic made no reply, but, breathing hard, he swam with Pete to an open spot at the side, and had just strength to draw himself out by a hanging branch, and then drop down exhausted, with the water streaming from him.

"No, no; don't leave me, Pete," he cried hoarsely.

"Must, my lad, must;" cried the man, preparing to turn and swim away. "You stop there, and I can zee you when I come back."

"It is impossible to overtake it. We must try and get down through the trees. You can't do it, I tell you."

"Must, and will, my lad," cried Pete. "Never zay die."

Nic sank back and watched the brave fellow as he swam away more vigorously than ever. At every stroke Pete's shoulders rose well above the surface, and, to all appearance, he was as fresh as when he started.

But there was the boat gliding down the stream, far enough away now, and beginning to look small between the towering trees rising on either side of the straight reach along which Nic gazed; and the watcher's agony grew intense.

"He'll swim till he gives up and sinks," said Nic to himself; "or else one of those horrid reptiles will drag him down."

He drew breath a little more hopefully, though, as he saw a bright flash of light glance from where Pete was swimming, for it told that the keen knife was held ready in the strong man's teeth; and he knew that the arm was vigorous that would

deliver thrust after thrust at any enemy which attempted to drag him down.

With the cessation of his exertion, Nic's breath began to come more easily, and he sat up to watch the head of the swimmer getting rapidly farther away, feeling that he had been a hindrance to the brave fellow, who had been studying his companion's powers all the time. But how much farther off the boat seemed still!—far enough to make Nic's heart sink lower and lower, and the loneliness of his situation to grow so terrible that it seemed more than he could bear.

For a full half-hour he sat watching the dazzling water, from which the sun flashed, while he was in the shade. Pete had not reached the boat, but he seemed now to be getting very near, though Nic knew how deceptive the distance was, and gazed on, with a pain coming behind his eyes, till all at once his heart leaped with joy, as now he could just make out that the boat was very near the shore, apparently touching some drooping boughs. Then his heart sank again, for he told himself that it was only fancy; and he shivered again as he felt how utterly exhausted Pete must be. Every moment he felt sure that he would see that little, dark speck disappear, but still it was there; and at last the watcher's heart began to throb, for the boat must have caught against those boughs. It was not moving.

The watcher would not believe this for a long time, but at last he uttered a cry of joy, followed by a groan; for, though the boat was there, the dark speck which represented Pete's head had disappeared; and, to make the watcher's despair more profound, the boat began to move once more, unmistakably gliding from beside the trees. All was over now, for Nic felt that to struggle longer was hopeless: there was nothing more to be done but lie down and die.

He held his hands over his brows, straining his failing, aching eyes to keep the boat in sight as long as he could; and then a strange choking sensation came into his throat, and he rose to his knees, for there was a flash of light from the water close to the boat, and another, and another. There was a strange, indistinct something, too, above the tiny line made by the gunwale, and it could only mean one thing: Pete had overtaken it, climbed in, and the flashes of light came from the disturbed surface of the river.

Pete must be trying to row her back to take him up.

The intense sensation of relief at knowing that the brave fellow was alive and safe seemed more than Nic could bear. He was already upon his knees. His face was bowed down upon his hands, and for a few minutes he did not stir.

At last, with a wave of strength and confidence seeming to run through every fibre of his body, Nic rose up, feeling fully rested; and, as he shaded his eyes once more to gaze down the river at the boat, the cloud of despair had floated away, and the long reach of glistening water looked like the way back to the bright world of hope and love—the way to home; while the thought of lying down there to die was but the filmy vapour of some fevered dream.

Pete was coming back to him: there could be no mistake about that, for Nic could see more clearly now, and there were moments when he could distinctly see the flashing of the water when the oars were dipped.

"Oh!" cried Nic, with his excitement rising now to the highest pitch, "and there was a time when I looked upon that brave, true-hearted fellow with contempt and disgust. How he is slaving there to send the great, heavy boat along!"

Nic watched till his eyes ached; and once more his heart began to sink, for the truth was rapidly being forced upon him that, in spite of Pete's efforts, the boat remained nearly motionless—the poor fellow was exhausting himself in his efforts to achieve the impossible.

What to do?

Nic was not long in making up his mind. He knew that Pete would try till he dropped back in the boat, and it would have been all in vain. The pair of them could hardly have rowed that heavy boat up-stream, and they were as yet far above the reach of the tide, or Pete might have waited and then come up. There was only one thing to do—go down to him.

A minute or two's trial proved to Nic that he could not tear his way through the dense growth on the bank till he was opposite his companion and could hail him to come ashore. There was only one thing to be done—swim down, and that he dared not do without help.

But the help was near, and he set to work.

He still had his keen knife, and the next moment he was hewing away at a patch of stout canes growing in the water, and as he attacked them he shuddered, for there was a wallowing rush, and he caught a glimpse of a small alligator's tail.

He did not stop, though. He knew that he had frightened the reptile, and this knowledge that the creatures did fear men gave him encouragement, making him work hard till he had cut a great bundle, ample to sustain him in the water. This he firmly bound with cane, and when this was done he once more gazed at the distant boat, which did not seem to have moved an inch.

How to make Pete grasp the fact that he was coming to join him? For even if he saw something floating down he would never think that it was his companion.

This task too was easy.

Cutting the longest cane he could reach, he cut off the leafy top, made a notch in what was left, and then inserting the point of his knife in the remaining sleeve of his shirt, he tore it off, ripped up the seam, and after dragging one end down through the knot and slit in the cane, he bound up the end with a strip of cotton, stuck the base firmly in the bundle or truss he had bound together, and so formed a little white flag.

"If he sees that he'll know," said Nic triumphantly; and without a moment's hesitation he thrust off from the bank with his cane bundle under one arm, and struck out with the other, finding plenty of support, and nothing more to do than fight his way out to where the stream ran most swiftly.

The scrap of white cotton fluttered bravely now and then, as, forcing himself not to think of the dangers that might be around, Nic watched and watched. He soon began to see the boat more distinctly, and in good time made out that his companion in misfortune grasped the position, rowing himself to the nearest drooping tree, making fast to a bough, and then laying in one oar and fixing the other up astern as a signal for his companion's guidance.

How short the time seemed then, and how easily Nic glided down, till he became aware of the fact that Pete was leaning over the side, knife in hand, watching eagerly. This sent a shudder through the swimmer, setting him thinking again of the perils that might be near, and how unlikely any effort of Pete's would be to save him should one of the reptiles attack.

The dread, however, soon passed off, for Nic's every nerve was strained to force the bundle of canes across the stream, so that it might drift right down upon the boat.

He could only succeed in part, and it soon became evident that he would float by yards away; but Pete was on the alert. He cast the boat adrift from where he had secured it to a drooping bough, and giving a few vigorous pulls with one oar, in another minute he had leaned over the bows, grasped his companion's hands, dragged him into the boat, and then, as the buoyant bundle of canes floated away, the poor fellow sank back in the bottom of the boat and lay staring helplessly.

"Don't you take no notice o' me, Master Nic," he said hoarsely. "Just put an oar over the ztarn and keep her head ztraight. Zhe'll go down fast enough. We ought to row up to fetch that fish we left, but we couldn't do it, zir; for I'm dead beat trying to get to you—just dead beat."

He closed his eyes, and then opened them again as he felt the warm grasp of Nic's hand, smiled at him, till his eyelids dropped again, and then sank into a deep stupor more than sleep.

Chapter Thirty Four.

Woman's Pity.

The sun sank lower and disappeared behind the trees straight away as the boat drifted on; the sky turned of a glorious amber, darkened quickly, and then it was black night, with the eerie cries of the birds rising on either side, and the margins of the swift river waking up into life with the hoarse bellowings and croakings of the reptiles which swarmed upon the banks. Every now and then there was a rush or a splash, or the heavy beating of the water, as some noisome creature sought its prey; and Nic sat there watching and listening, wakeful enough, and always on the alert to catch the breathing of his companion, who for hours had not stirred.

"Beat out," said Nic to himself; "utterly exhausted, poor fellow! If I could only feel that it was a natural sleep."

He was thoroughly done-up himself, and in spite of his efforts to keep awake, and the dread inspired by the movements of the strange creatures splashing about in the water, and often

enough apparently close at hand, he could not keep from dozing off time after time, but only to start up in an agony of fear. He hardly lost consciousness, and at such times the startling noises and movements around him in the darkness seemed to be continued in the wild dreams which instantly commenced.

Now in imagination he saw through the transparent darkness some huge alligator making for the boat, where it reared itself up, curved over, and seemed about to seize upon Pete, when he raised the oar with which he was keeping the boat's head straight and struck at the monster with all his might, and in the act awoke.

Another time Nic dropped off, to imagine that they were slowly gliding beneath the far-spreading boughs of a gigantic forest tree; and, as they swept on, something soft and heavy suddenly hung down into the boat, began crawling about, and at last stopped its progress by coiling itself round one of the thwarts, and then raising its head high in the air and beginning to dart its tongue, now at Nic, now at the motionless body of Pete, who still lay sleeping soundly.

Nic felt powerless, and lay watching the approach of the huge boa, seeing it plainly in spite of the darkness and suffering an agony of horror as he felt that he could not move, but must lie there, quite at the mercy of the powerful reptile, which drew the boat over so much on one side that the water, as it rippled by, rose apparently higher and higher till it was about to pour in.

Ripple, ripple, ripple, against the sides, while the boughs of a tree swept over his face, the touch awakening the dreamer, who uttered a low gasp of relief as he realised how much the water and the brushing of the leaves over his face had had to do with the dream from which he had just been roused.

Morning at last, with the east all aglow, and the beauties of river and tree sweeping away the horrors of the black night.

Pete awoke as if by instinct, and started into a sitting position, to stare hard at his companion.

"Why, Master Nic, you aren't never gone and let me sleep all night?"

"Indeed, but I have, Pete," replied Nic. "Feel better?"

"No, zir. Never felt so 'shamed of myself in my life. Oh dear! oh dear! To think of my doing that! Where are we, zir? 'Most got to that t'other zattlement, aren't uz?"

"What! where we rested for the night, Pete? No; I don't think we are near that yet."

"Then get nigh we must," cried Pete, putting out his oar. "We've got to find some braxfuss there. What we had yes'day don't zeem to count a bit. I zay, though, you don't think they got another boat and passed us while we were asleep, do you?"

"No, Pete," replied Nic, smiling; "and I don't think that we shall dare to land at that plantation lower down. The man there would know we are escaped slaves, and stop us."

"He'd better not," said Pete, with a curious look in his eyes. "He's the only man there."

"There are several blacks."

"Blacks!" cried Pete contemptuously. "I'm not afraid o' them. It's o' no use, Master Nic; I've tried hard to bear it, and I can bear a deal, but when it comes to starvation it's again' my natur'. I must eat, and if he calls twenty blacks to stop me I mean to have zomething, and zo shall you. Why, lad, you look as if you're half-dead wi' want o' zleep and a morsel o' food. Nay, nay; you leave that oar alone, and cover your head up with those leaves while you have a good rest. By that time p'raps we may get a bit o' braxfuss."

"I'm not sleepy, Pete," said Nic sadly.

"P'raps not, zir; but man must eat and he must zleep, so you lie back in the bottom of the boat. Now, no fighting agen it, zir; you worked all night, zo I must work all day."

"Well, I'll lie down for an hour, Pete, for I do feel very weary. As soon as you think an hour's gone, you wake me up."

"Right, Master Nic, I will," cried Pete heartily; and after a glance up and down the river, the young man sank back in the bottom of the boat, settled the leafy cap and veil in one over his face to shield it from the sun, and the next minute—to him—he unclosed his eyes to find that Pete was kneeling beside him with a hand on each shoulder as if he had been shaking the sleeper.

"Hullo! Yes; all right, Pete, I've had such a sleep. Why, Pete, it must be getting on for noon."

"Ay, that it is, my lad; noon to-morrow. But don't bully me, zir; you was zleeping just lovely, and I couldn't waken you. Here we are at that farm-place, and I don't zee the man about, but yonder's the two women."

"And the dogs, Pete?"

"Nay, don't zee no dogs. Maybe they're gone along wi' the master. Come on, lad; I've tied the boat up to this post, and we'll go up and ask the women yonder to give us a bit o' zomething to eat."

The place looked very familiar as Nic glanced round and recalled the time when he reached there, and their departure the next morning, with the looks of sympathy the two women had bestowed.

Just as he recalled this he caught sight of the younger woman, who came from the door of the roughly-built house, darted back and returned with her mother, both standing gazing at their visitors as they landed from the boat.

"Must go up to the house quiet-like, Master Nic, or we shall scare 'em," said Pete. "Just you wave your hand a bit to show 'em you know 'em. Dessay they 'members we."

Nic slowly waved his hand, and then shrugged his shoulders as he glanced down at his thin cotton rags; and his piteous plight made him ready to groan.

"We must go up to them as beggars, Pete," he said.

"That's right enough for me, Master Nic; but you're a gentleman, zir, and they'll know it soon as you begin to speak. Let's go on, zir. I'm that hungry I could almost eat you."

Nic said nothing, but began to walk on towards the house by his companion's side, anxiously watching the two women the while, in the full expectation that they would retreat and shut the door against their visitors.

But neither stirred, and the fugitives were half-way to the house, when suddenly there was a growl and a rush.

"Knives, Master Nic," cried Pete, for three great dogs came charging from the back of the low shed which had given the slaves shelter on their journey up the river. The dogs had evidently been basking in the sunshine till they had caught sight of the strangers, and came on baying furiously.

Nic followed his companion's example and drew his knife, feeling excited by the coming encounter; but before the dogs reached them the two women came running from the door, crying out angrily at the fierce beasts, whose loud barking dropped into angry growls as they obeyed the calls of their mistresses—the younger woman coming up first, apron in hand, to beat off the pack and drive them before her, back to one of the out-buildings, while her mother remained gazing compassionately at the visitors.

"Thank you," said Nic, putting back his knife. "Your dogs took us for thieves. We are only beggars, madam, asking for a little bread."

"Have you—have you escaped from up yonder?" said the woman, sinking her voice.

"Yes," said Nic frankly. "I was forced away from home for no cause whatever. I am trying to get back."

"It is very shocking," said the woman sadly, as her daughter came running up breathlessly. "Some of the men they have there are bad and wicked, and I suppose they deserve it; but Ann and I felt so sorry for you when you came that night months ago. You seemed so different."

"You remember us, then?" said Nic, smiling sadly.

"Oh yes," cried the younger woman eagerly. "But they are hungry, mother. Bring them up to the house; I've shut-in the dogs."

"I don't know what your father would say if he knew what we did," said the woman sadly. "It's against the law to help slaves to escape."

"It isn't against the law to give starving people something to eat, mother."

"It can't be; can it, dear?" said the woman. "And we needn't help them to escape."

"No," said Pete; "we can manage that if you'll give us a bit o' bread. I won't ask for meat, missus; but if you give us a bit, too, I'd thank you kindly."

"Bring them up, mother," said the girl; "and if father ever knows I'll say it was all my fault."

"Yes; come up to the house," said the elder woman. "I can't bear to see you poor white men taken for slaves."

"God bless you for that!" cried Nic, catching at the woman's hand; but his action was so sudden that she started away in alarm.

"Oh mother!" cried the girl; "can't you see what he meant?"

The woman held out her hand directly, and Nic caught it. The next moment he had clasped the girl's hands, which were extended to him; but she snatched them away directly with a sob, and ran into the house, while the mother bade the pair sit down on a rough bench to rest.

The girl was not long absent; but when she returned with a big loaf and a piece of bacon her eyes looked very red.

"There," she said, setting the provisions before them; "you'd better take this and go, in case father should come back and see you. Don't, please, tell us which way you're going, and we won't look; for we shouldn't like to know and be obliged to tell. Oh!"

The girl finished her speech with a cry of horror; for how he had approached no one could have said, but the planter suddenly came up with a gun over his shoulder, and stood looking on as, with a quick movement, Pete snatched at the loaf and thrust it under one arm.

"Hullo!" said the man quietly as he looked from one to the other; "where are the dogs?"

"I shut 'em up, father, so as they shouldn't hurt these two poor men."

"An' s'pose these two poor men wanted to hurt you; what then?"

"But they didn't, father," said the girl, as the mother stood shivering. "They were hungry, and only wanted something to eat."

"Yes, that's right, master," said Pete stoutly. "We shouldn't hurt no one."

"Let's see," said the planter; "I've seen you both before. My neighbour brought you up months ago."

"Yes," said Nic firmly; "but he had no right to detain us as slaves."

"Humph! S'pose not," said the planter, glancing sharply from one to the other. "So you're both runaways?"

"We are trying for our liberty," replied Nic, who was well upon his guard; but the man's reply disarmed him.

"Well, it's quite nat'ral," said the planter, with a chuckle. "Hot work hoeing the rows, eh? Took the boat, I s'pose, and rowed down?"

"Yes," said Pete gruffly.

"Hungry too, eh?"

"Yes," said Pete again.

"Course you would be. Quite nat'ral. They've give you a bit to eat, I see. Well, then, you'd better come and sit down out o' the sun and eat it, and then be off, for your overseer won't be long before he's down here after you. He's a sharp un, Master Saunders, aren't he?"

"Yes; he's sharp enough," said Pete quietly.

"He'll be down after you with his dogs, and then, if he catches you, there'll be a big row and a fight, and I don't want nothing o' that sort, my lads. Come on, and bring your bread and meat in here.—Ann, my gal, get 'em a pitcher o' cool, fresh water."

"Yes, father," said the girl; and, as the planter turned off to lead the way, Nic caught the lass's eyes; for she began to make quick movements of her lips, and her eyes almost spoke as she pointed towards the river and signed to them to go.

Nic gave her an intelligent nod, and followed Pete after the planter into the great, barn-like place which had been their prison for the night when they were there before; but as he passed the door he noticed the great wooden bar turning upon a bolt, and fully realised that the girl's signs were those of warning, for treachery was meant.

"Nice and cool in here," said the man. "Sit ye down on the corn-husks there. My gal will soon be back with the water; and I wouldn't be long, if I were you, in case Master Saunders should come down the river, for when he asked me if you two was here I couldn't tell a lie about it, could I?"

"No," growled Pete. "That would be a pity."

"Ay; it would. But he'd know you was both here by the boat. Where did you tie it up?"

"Just at the bottom there, by the trees," said Nic, to whom these words were addressed.

"Ah, 'tis the best place," said the man, halting by the door, and standing aside to make room for the young men to pass. "In with you. It's better than being in the hot sun. Seems a bit dark; but it's cooler to have your dinner there. Well," he continued, "why don't you go in? The dogs are not here."

"Because it looks like a trap, sir," said Nic firmly. "Do you want to shut us up there, and keep us prisoners till your neighbour comes?"

"Yes, I do," cried the planter fiercely as he stepped back, and with one motion brought down and cocked his piece, which he presented at the young man's breast. "In with you both, or I'll shoot you like dogs!"

He raised his gun to his shoulder and drew the trigger; but it was too late. Nic had sprung forward, striking up the barrel; and, as the mother and daughter shrieked aloud from the house door, there was a sharp report, which set the dogs baying furiously from the shed in which they were fastened.

A short struggle followed, in which the gun was wrested from the planter's hands by Nic, and the next moment Pete had joined in the fray, securing the planter's arms, and then with Nic's help he was dragged and thrown into the great barn. Then the door was banged to and fastened with the bar; and the

prisoner began to call and threaten what he would do if his people did not let loose the dogs.

What followed would have seemed almost comic to a spectator, for the two women came hurrying up with their fingers stuck in their ears.

"Run—run to your boat!" they whispered. "We can't hear what he says now, but we must soon, and then we shall be obliged to let out the dogs."

"Oh, mother!" cried the girl, "the blacks will be here directly."

"Yes, yes," cried the elder woman, who somehow seemed to have heard that. "Run, then, run, and get away before it is too late."

"God bless you both for what you have done for us!" cried Nic. "I pray that you may not get into more trouble on our account."

"Oh, father won't hurt me," said the girl; "and he shan't hurt mother. Serve him right for being so cruel. You never did him any harm."

"Oh, run, run!" cried the woman, with her fingers still in her ears; and the two young men dashed off to the boat and leapt in, Nic's next action, as Pete unfastened the slight cord, being to fling the gun as far out into the river as he could.

"Oh!" cried Pete, "what did you do that for?" as the gun fell with a splash and disappeared.

"I was not going to steal the scoundrel's gun," said Nic, seizing an oar.

"Well, it wouldn't ha' been any use without powder and zhot," said Pete as he thrust the boat out into the stream. "Good-bye to you both," he shouted, waving his hand to the two women, who stood waving their aprons.

"But it seems cowardly, Pete, to go and leave them in the lurch."

"Ay, it do, Master Nic; but it only means a rowing for them, and it's life and liberty for us."

There was another wave of a white apron as the boat glided out into mid-stream, and Nic responded with his hand. Then trees

interposed and hid the house and sheds from view, and the fugitives went on straining at their oars till they felt that their safety was assured, when they relaxed their efforts.

"That was close, Master Nic," said Pete. "Treacherous martal. Wish I'd give him a good topper before we zhut the door."

"I'm glad you did not, for his wife and daughter's sake," replied Nic. "Poor things! they will suffer for their gentle, womanly compassion towards a pair of poor escaped slaves."

"Ay, it was good of 'em, Master Nic. Zees how hungry we were, and fetches that fresh brown loaf, and all that pink-and-white bacon as looks d'licious. Zo, as we're going gently on, and not likely for him to take boat after us, what do you say to staying all that horrid gnawing of our insides with a good bite and sup? But—I say, Master Nic, what did you do with that bacon and bread?"

Nic looked sharply up at Pete, and the latter uttered a dismal groan. The bread and bacon had gone, neither knew where, in the struggle, and the landing and encounter had all been for nothing.

"Not quite," Nic said later on. They had learned how much gentle compassion existed for the poor white slaves, even in a district where the sight of them was so common.

"P'raps so, Master Nic; but I'd give all the compassion in the world just now for a zlice of that bacon and a hunk of bread. What's to be done now, zir?"

"Row, Pete, row; and let's try and forget our hunger in the knowledge that we are so far free."

"Right, zir; we will. But what about that treacherous hound? Think he's got a boat?"

"Sure to have," replied Nic.

"Then he'll come after as zoon as he can get help; and if he do—Well, I should be sorry to hurt him, on account of them as was kind to us; but if he does ketch it, mind, Master Nic, it's his fault and not mine."

There was no more talking, for both felt morose and weak, their growing sense of hunger making them more and more silent and disinclined to speak.

Still, fortune favoured them to a certain extent, for there had been rain somewhere inland, and the stream ran as if it were in flood higher up, so that their rate of progress was swift.

As the hours went on and there was no sign of pursuit—no enemies who had made a short cut to the river-bank waiting to fire at them from among the trees—the fugitives grew more and more confident; and when at last they reached another swamp, the alligators appeared to be less monstrous and the gloomy place lost half its forbidding aspect.

At last, after endless difficulties, and nearly starved, the tidal part of the river was reached, and, to the delight of both, they found that they had hit exactly the right moment, for the tide was at its height, and stood as if waiting to bear them onward towards the sea.

Excitement had kept off all thought of food; but when, after a long journey, they approached the straggling town at nightfall and saw the twinkling lights, an intense desire seized upon both to land as soon as possible and satisfy their needs.

"You see, we lost everything, Master Nic, in that struggle. What you looking at, zir?"

"You, Pete. I was thinking."

"What about, zir?"

"About this place. If we land we must go to some house for food; and when we two half-naked, miserable, starved wretches have obtained what we want we shall be asked to pay."

"My word!" gasped Pete, ceasing to row. "I never thought of that. And we aren't got any money."

"Not a coin."

"And they'd want it here just the same as they would at home, though it is a foreign country?"

"Of course."

"Then I tell you what, Master Nic," said Pete after a long pause; "we must go straight to zomebody and tell 'em how we've been zarved, and ask him to help us."

"We should have to tell them everything, Pete."

"Of course, zir; downright honest."

"And who would believe us at a place like this, where we know that poor wretches are brought to go up to the plantations?"

"Oh, hark at him!" sighed Pete. "And I'd been thinking our troubles were over, and we'd got nothing to do but get plenty to eat and a good ship to take us home. You're right, zir; it would be as mad as March hares to go ashore. They'd put us in prison and keep us there till old Zaunders come again with his dogs and guns and niggers to take us back; and when we got to the plantation it would be the lash and short commons, and the hoe again out in the hot sun."

"Yes, Pete," said Nic sadly; "that is what I fear."

"And you're a deal longer-headed than me, master. It's going and giving ourselves up for the sake of a good dinner. Master Nic!"

"Yes, Pete."

"Just buckle your belt a bit tighter, two or three holes, like this. That's the way. Now then, take hold of your oar again. We can hold out another day or two on what we can find, while we coast along till we see a ship outward bound somewhere. Sure to be lots. Then we'll row till they see us and pick us up. They won't bring us back, that's for sartain, but to the port they're going to; and of course they can't starve us. Then they'll hand us over to a judge o' some kind, and as soon as he hears your story you'll be all right; and—and—"

"Yes, Pete?"

"I know I've been a bad un; Master Nic; but I'm going to turn over a new leaf, zir, and never meddle wi' the zalmon again. You'll put in a good word for a poor fellow, won't you?"

"A good word for you—for one who has been ready to risk his life again and again to help me? Pete, we have been brothers in our great misfortune, and we must hold together, come what may."

"Then take a good grip of your oar, Master Nic, and let's forget being empty by taking our fill of work. Pull away, my lad, right out, and I dessay the tide'll run us along the shore, as it does at home. When the day comes again we shall zoon zee a zhip. We can't give up now. Ready?"

"Yes."

"Then pull."

And in their desperate strait, feeling as they did that they would starve sooner than go back to slavery, those two bent to their oars in the darkness that closed them in, and rowed on with the swift tide. The lights on the shore grew fainter, the tide swifter, and the water became rough; but they rowed on, hungry, exhausted: on and on, ignorant of the set of the tides, of the trend of the coast, and without a drop of fresh water to satisfy their thirst. A mad, mad attempt; but it was for liberty—for all that man holds dear. What wonder that when the day dawned both had sunk forward over their oars and were sleeping heavily, to wake at last with the southern sun beating down upon their heads, and that they gazed at each other in a half-delirious, stupefied way, wondering what had happened and where they were.

There was a faint appearance as of a cloud low down on the water far-away, but no cloud overhead, nothing but the burning, blistering sun to send a fierce energy through Nic's veins, which made him keep calling wildly upon Pete to row, row hard, before they were overtaken and dragged back to a white slave's life.

Pete's eyes were staring fiercely, and looked bloodshot, while his throat was hot and dry, his brain felt as if on fire; but at every order from Nic he bent down over his oar and pulled and pulled, till his strokes grew more and more wild, and at last, as he made one more desperate than ever, he did not dip the blade, but fell backward from the thwart. Then, after vainly trying to pull with both oars himself, Nic turned to face his companion in misfortune, wondering in his delirium why he was there.

The sun went down like a ball of fire on his left, and directly after, as it seemed, rose like a ball of fire on his right. It was that, he felt, which caused all his suffering, and in his rage and indignation he turned upon it fiercely, and then bent down to lap up the sparkling water which tempted him and seemed to promise to allay his awful thirst.

He reached down and dipped his hand, but the attitude seemed to send the blood like molten lead running to his brain, and with a weary groan he fell sidewise and rolled over in the bottom of the boat.

Chapter Thirty Five.

Safe at last.

"Looks like a ship's longboat, sir; but she's right under the sun, and I can't make her out."

"Any one in her?"

"No, sir; not a soul."

The conversation was between the captain and one of the foremast men of the good ship *Sultan*, bound from a western city with passengers and sugar to the port of Bristol. The wind was very light, and men were up aloft, setting the main top-gallant sail, when the boat was sighted only a little way out of the vessel's course.

Then the captain argued, as he took a look at her from the main-top, that a boat like that might be battered, and not worth the trouble of picking up; but, on the other hand, she might; and finally, after taking the first-mate into debate, it was decided to steer a point or two to the west and pick her up.

"For who knows what she may have aboard, or what good ship may have been wrecked?" the skipper said to one of the passengers brought on deck by the news of a boat in sight, for such an event broke the monotony of the tedious voyage.

As the news spread through the ship the rest of the passengers came on deck, and when the boat was neared, the captain, as he stood inspecting the object through his glass, began to be satisfied that the find was in good condition, and then the announcement came from aloft that there were two bodies lying in the bottom.

The excitement now became fierce; one of the ship's boats was swung out on the davits ready for lowering, manned, and dropped, and finally the prize was brought alongside, with its freight still alive, but apparently at their last gasp.

Fortunately the captain was a man of old experience in the tropics, and noting that there was neither food nor water on board, he put the right construction upon the poor fellows'

condition—that they were dying of hunger and thirst, after escaping from some wrecked or sinking vessel.

Merchant captains have a smattering of knowledge, and a medicine chest on board, and there were willing hands to take charge of “the poor shipwrecked men;” but it was a hard fight with the raging fever and delirium from which both suffered, and again and again they were given over, and were still too weak to answer questions when Bristol port was reached, and they were taken to hospital ashore.

It was quite a month before the journey home could be taken in the old stage-coach bound from Bristol to Plymouth.

But Nic bore it well, for Captain Revel was seated by his side, holding his hand as if afraid that after all his son might slip from his grasp and the old suffering recommence.

“It nearly killed me before, my boy,” he said piteously, as he urged his son to be careful not to exert himself in the least. “I gave you up for dead, and I was following you fast, Nic, for I don’t believe I should have lived another year.”

“I’ll take care, father; never fear,” said the young man cheerily, for, though thin and worn, his eyes were brightening, and there were signs of returning health in his cheeks. “I only need a good, quiet rest in the old place, where I can lie and watch the sea, or go down the shady old combe, to listen to the falls and watch the salmon leap.”

“Ugh! don’t talk about the fish,” cried the Captain, with a shudder; “they were the cause of all this suffering.”

“Oh no,” said Nic, smiling. “It was all that terrible mistake.”

“Well, don’t let’s talk about the past,” said the Captain hurriedly; “or only about one thing, my boy. I did want to consult you about that fellow who’s up aloft with William Solly.”

“About Pete, father?”

“Yes, the scoundrel! He was as bad as the salmon.”

“Poor old Pete!” said Nic, smiling. “He saved my life over and over again, father. I want you to take him into your service.”

"What! that poacher who used to defy us all?"

"Poachers make the best keepers, father, when they reform; and Pete has proved himself a good man and true. Will you tell him he is to stay?"

"I'll keep a dozen of such fellows if you'll only get strong and well again, my boy," said the old sailor eagerly. "I'll tell him next time we change horses. But I shall never forgive Lawrence."

"What, father!" cried Nic, smiling. "Why?"

"An old comrade like he has always been, to have such a stupid blunder made by those under his command."

"A terrible mistake, father; but, to be quite fair, it was all my doing, and I was hoist with my own petard."

"No, no, Nic; you're wrong," said the old man, "and William Solly—an impudent rascal!—was right."

"How, father?"

"Well, my boy, it was all my fault for making such a fuss about a few salmon. William Solly had the insolence to tell me I made a trouble about nothing, and wanted a real one to do me good. This has been a real one, Nic, and I've suffered bitterly."

"But there's fair weather ahead, father."

"Please God, my boy," said the old man piously, and with his voice trembling, "and—and there, Nic, I've got you back again, and you will get well, my boy—you will get well, won't you?"

"Fast, father," replied Nic, pressing the old man's hand.

Nic did mend rapidly in the rest and quiet of his old home, where one day Captain Lawrence, newly returned from a long voyage, came to see his old friend, and heard Nic's adventures to the end.

"A bitter experience, my dear boy," he said; "but let's look to the future now: never mind the past."

But one day, when the convalescents had been for two months drinking in the grand old Devon air, Nic was rambling through

the combe with Pete, both pretty well strong again, when the latter said:

"I want to be zet to work now, Master Nic, or to be zent away; for I feel as if I ought to be doing zomething, instead of idling about here."

"You've talked like that before, Pete," said Nic, smiling. "Have a little patience, and then you shall begin."

"But it zeems zo long, zir. I zay, though, it's rather queer, isn't it, for me to be water bailiff and keeper over the vish as I used to take. Think Humpy Dee and them others will get away and come back again?"

"I hope so," said Nic slowly and thoughtfully. "They deserved their punishment, but they will have had enough by now."

"Nay, you're a bit too easy, Master Nic. Humpy's a down bad one, and I should like the others to have one year more out yonder, and Humpy too."

"Too long for white slaves, Pete," said Nic. "We have suffered with them, and know what the sufferings are; so I forgive them. What say you?"

"Zame as you do, Master Nic; o' course, that is, if they don't come back and meddle with our zalmon again—*our zalmon*! That zounds queer, Master Nic, don't it? I can't quite feel as if it's all true."

"But it is true, Pete; and we are here safe in the good old home, after what seems now like an ugly dream."

"Dinner-bell's rung twice, Master Nic," said William Solly, coming upon them suddenly from behind the trees; "and you can't 'spect to get your strength up proper if you aren't reg'lar at the mess. I run out to look for you, to keep the skipper from—Well, there now—if he aren't come to look for you hisself! Give him a shout, and say you're coming."

Nic hailed, and hurried back to meet the old officer, while William Solly turned to Pete:

"Come along, messmet; the beef and soft tack's waiting. And so you're going to stop here altogether!"

"I s'pose so," said Pete.

"And we're to be messmets reg'lar sarving under Captain Revel and Master Nic?"

"That's it," said Pete sturdily.

"Well," said Solly, "I aren't jealous, for you did the right thing by the young master; so let's shake hands."

This was solemnly done, and Solly went on:

"As good a skipper as ever stepped a deck, and as fine a boy as ever breathed. Pete, messmet, you've dropped into a snug thing."

"Which that zame I know," said Pete gruffly.

"But you saved Master Nic's life, and the skipper's too, by bringing the young master back; and I'm glad you're going to stay. So suppose we shakes hands agen?"

They did, as if they meant it, too.

They did mean it, and somehow a great attachment sprang up between those two men, while as time rolled on Nic smiled more than once on meeting them consulting together about matters connected with the estate, and made Solly wince.

At last, after a good deal of hesitation, Solly turned upon his young master.

"Beg pardon, sir," he said; "speaking respeckful like—"

"What is it?" said Nic, for the man stopped.

"Well, sir, you know; and it goes hard on a chap as is doing his dooty and wants to keep things straight."

"I still don't understand you, Solly," said Nic.

"Well, sir, it's all along o' that there chap, Pete: you never ketch me a-talking to him, and giving him a bit o' good advice about what the skipper likes done, but you grins."

"Grins?"

"Oh, it's no use to make believe, Master Nic, because you do, and it hurts."

"They were not grins," said Nic. "I only smiled because I was glad to see you two such good friends."

"Ho!" ejaculated Solly; "that was it, sir? I thought you was grinning and thinking what an old fool I was."

"Nothing of the sort."

"Well, I'm glad o' that, Master Nic, though it do seem a bit queer that I should take a lot o' notice of a feller as fought agen us as he did. But we aren't friends, sir."

"Indeed!" said Nic.

"It's on'y that I can't help taking a bit to a man as stood by you as he did over yonder in furren abroad. You see, a man like that's got the making of a good true mate in him."

"Yes, Solly, of as good a man as ever stepped."

Two years had passed, when one day Solly watched his opportunity of catching Nic alone in the grounds, and followed him.

"Master Nic!" he whispered hoarsely.

The young man turned round, and Solly "made a face" at him. That is to say, he shut his left eye very slowly and screwed up the whole of his countenance till it was a maze of wrinkles.

"What is it, Solly?"

"Pete's over yonder, sir, by the combo, and wants to speak to you."

"Oh, very well, I'll go," said Nic, and the old sailor nodded, looked mysterious, slapped his mouth to indicate that it was a secret mission, and hurried away.

"What does it all mean?" said Nic to himself. "Why, I do believe Pete is going to tell me that he wants to be married, and to ask if my father will object."

He reached the combe, to find Pete, now a fine sturdy-looking Devon man in brown velveteen jacket and leather gaiters, counting the salmon in the pool.

Pete turned sharply directly he heard Nic approach, and the serious look in the man's face told that something unusual had occurred.

"Morn', Master Nic, zir."

"What is it, Pete? Surely you don't mean that we've had poachers again?"

"Poachers it be, zir," said the man mysteriously; "but they won't come here again. Master Nic, there's three on 'em come back, and I've zeen 'em."

"What! From the plantation?"

"Yes, zir; after a long spell of it they managed to give the dogs zome poison stuff they got out of the woods. The blacks told 'em of it. Manshy something it was."

"Manchioneel! I know," said Nic.

"That's it, zir, and it killed 'em. They got away in a boat—a new un, I s'pose."

"I'm glad they escaped, poor fellows," said Nic; "but is that scoundrel Dee with them?"

Pete was silent.

"Dead, Pete?"

"Yes, zir, 'fore we'd been gone two months," said the man gravely. "He went at Zaunders one day with his hoe, and nearly killed him; but the dogs heard the fight, and rushed down."

"Ah! the dogs!" cried Nic.

"Yes, zir, and what with their worrying and a shot he'd had from Zaunders, it meant a couple o' the blacks with spades, and a grave in the woods."

"Horrible!" ejaculated Nic.

"Yes, zir, horrible. Humpy allus hated me, and I s'pose I never liked him; but if I'd been there, zir, I'd ha' helped him fight for his life agen them zavage dogs."

"I know you would, Pete," cried Nic warmly. "But what about these men—are they going to stay in the neighbourhood?"

"Not they, zir. They belong to the crew of a ship in Plymouth harbour; and zomehow they got to know that I was here. They walked all the way o' purpose to wish me luck and zhake hands and zay they hadn't aught agen me, for they'd found out how it was they was took. It was poor Humpy as made 'em believe it was me. They went back lars night."

"Poor Humpy!" said Nic wonderingly.

"Well, yes, zir. You zee, he weren't like other men," said Pete simply. "He was born all crooked and out o' shape and ugly, and got teased and kicked about when he was a boy; and I zuppose it made him zour and evil-tempered. Then he grew up stronger than other men, and he got to love getting the better of them as had knocked him about. I dunno, but it allus zeemed zo to me. Well, poor chap, he's dead, and there's an end on it."

"Yes," said Nic, gravely repeating the man's words, "there's an end of it."

The End.
